

A Laughter That Will Bury You All:  
The Antagonistic Gesture of *Autonomia* and *Operaismo*

Luhuna CARVALHO

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## Abstract

Several contemporary critical currents, from post-*operaismo* to autonomist Marxism, report their conceptual lineage to the Italian political struggles of the 60s and 70s, a period known as the “long 68”. *Operaismo*’s famous claim of a political primacy and autonomy of the working class within the reproduction of capital is synthesized as the essential trope of the period’s legacy and set as the keystone for ulterior developments. While partially accurate, such assertion erases the complexity of the conceptual debate around the period’s intense antagonism. In different ways, *operaismo*, a theoretical current, and *autonomia*, an insurrectional social movement, sought to derive a theory of antagonism rather than establish a normative periodization of the transformations within the relations between capital and labour. This thesis reads such effort as an attempt to conceive a repertoire of forms of action and being within real subsumption. Within *operaismo* and *autonomia*, alongside the constituent claim of class primacy, a tentative theory of a destituent power is also to be found. It is the confrontation between these positions that will spell out the movement’s development and demise.

This first part of the thesis addresses how the categories of refusal of labour, antagonism, and movement emerge out of the confrontation between Marx’s critique of political economy and the period’s autonomous struggles. The antinomies of Marx’s concept of labour are read as an open problematic from which *operaismo* grasps emerging repertoires of dissent: the refusal of labour as social form. Antonio Negri affirms this as the position from which to fully understand the Marxian critique of political economy as a theory of class antagonism. This effort, however, grounds Negri’s attempt to derive a political leadership to the burgeoning self-consciousness shown within the struggles themselves.

The widespread generalization of the proto-insurrectional practices associated with the refusal of labour throughout the 70s unearths an assemblage of wildly contradictory positions and repertoires that coalesce around the attempts to build a common ontology of antagonism and refusal while refusing any process of institutionalization. The second part of this thesis looks at such ontology of refusal. While *autonomia* was seemingly split along “organized” and “creative” factions, in both we find a shared understanding of political action as an undoing of capital’s apparatuses of command. Giorgio Agamben’s

work, a seemingly unlikely figure in this context, emerges as the most earnest attempt to deduct the categories of such undoing, an effort which reaches its apex in his theory of a destituent power. Going beyond the aporias of Agamben's exposition of the problematic, the possibility of a "negative care" is found, of a common gesture of aid and antagonism that does not attempt to affirm any identity or method.

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## Introduction: A piano at the barricades.

Saturday. Dusk already. Piazza Verdi and Via Zamboni are covered in debris, burnt tear gas cartridges, and small pieces of marble. The police have left. Weariness. Anger. Joy. A perfume of rebellion after years of submission. Comrades smile with eyes reddened by the tear gas. Expensive wine bottles, stolen from the bars, travel from hand to hand. Champagne. Marijuana. Molotov... A Piano plays Chopin. It stands in the middle of the road, taken from a bar, just behind a barricade. Everyone is drunk. Today nobody rules. Tomorrow? Tomorrow the tanks will arrive. We'll be expelled again, but today, for a few hours, this land is free. Chopin. Wine. Rage and play.

Marcello Tarì, *Autonomie!* (2012)

*Operaismo*, an Italian Marxist current from the 1960s and '70s, and *autonomia*, its contemporaneous social movement *cum* failed insurrectional experiment: "the '68 that lasted ten years," "creeping May," the "long '68."

Long as in lasting a decade, but also long as in a strenuous affair that longs to come to terms with itself. 50 years after, the whole ordeal remains fairly unknown, clouded by its mythical status and shrouded in the secrecy of ill-resolved family affairs. Beneath the eulogies, the movement's piling *memoirs* are for the most part tainted with an intense melancholy and the burden of not being able to distinguish one's dreams from one's regrets. This is very much the opposite of the sanguine optimism normally associated with Antonio Negri, who still remains the period's most recognized interpreter.

The documents that testify to this bitter memory are scattered just beyond the reach of curiosity. *Faux hard-boiled* novels like Massimo Carlotto's *Arrivederci Amore, Ciao: Storia di un Canaglia* (2005) tell of the movement's foray into violent criminality once its collapse became obvious. The main character traverses all the stages of moral decay and betrayal, only to end up becoming a police collaborator. The novel touches upon all the ill-resolved violence that remains from the period. The same tangible despair, albeit in radically different overtones, appears in *Vingt Ans Après: Réfugiés*

*Italiens, Vies en suspens* (2003), a compilation of photos taken by some of the exiled *autonomi* in France.<sup>1</sup> Grainy *Chiaroscuro silhouettes* haunting the Parisian *bas-fonds*, the price to pay for all previous attempts to storm heaven. Sergio Bianchi's exile diaries<sup>2</sup> could serve as intertitles for a silent film unfolding in such images: days spent waiting for nothing, a void filling an affective space which just years before had been wild and festive.

This bitter and intimate aspect of the experience remains buried beneath the myth of a '68 carried all the way to its maximum power. Such a "first prize" is certainly indigestible: its wounds still open, its enemies still in power.

By "myth" I mean to suggest that this maximal '68 also prevails as grounding fable. The popularity of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire* (2000) within the anti-globalization movements of the 2000s, and the significance of these movements in the reconstruction of the left after 1989, meant that *operaismo* and *autonomia* were relegated to scenic backdrop for the rise of a "post-*operaismo*" and an "Italian theory." For many readers, this seemed to embody what remained to be salvaged from the period, purged from its excesses, its folklore and its sanguinity.

This is not surprising. Until very recently, the Italian 1960s and '70s was either overly synthesized under post-*operaismo*'s "party line" or, on the contrary, their historical documents were left scattered amongst diffuse archives and personal tragedies. The self-assumed grandeur of the period's pundits and heirs only furthered the period's mythification. In their opinion (and I agree), *autonomia* is a thorn that remains stuck in the side of contemporary capital and the conflicts arising within it. The aftermath of the Italian 1960s and '70s remains an open judicial problem, a lingering political question, a legacy missing its closure—its proverbial dusk permanently postponed. This lack of closure, however, perpetuates itself as unresolvable loss, rather than as ongoing self-interrogation: the critical inquiry into *operaismo* and *autonomia* seems to hinge on the necessity of validating its conceptual and political framework rather than interrogating its

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<sup>1</sup> In the early 80s hundreds of *autonomia* militants found exile in France under the "doctrine Mitterrand."

<sup>2</sup> Bianchi, Sergio. "Diario dell'Esilio" in *Derive Approdi* 16. Summer 1998

meaning. *Post-operaismo* isn't really what came *after operaismo*; instead, it consists of the attempts made to preserve its actuality beyond its singular historical context.

Two almost unrelated recent events attest to a change in this situation. The first concerns the slow progress of the availability of primary materials in English. In the fall of 2019, more than 40 years after its first Italian edition in 1967, a translation of Mario Tronti's seminal *Operai e Capitale* was finally published. A forthcoming translation of Sergio Bianchi's and Primo Moroni's 1988 book, *L'Orda d'Oro*, the first overarching historical account of the period, was also announced for 2020. Even if not as widely read as his later work, Negri's essays and pamphlets from the '70s, *Books for Burning* (2005) and *Marx beyond Marx* (1992), have long been available but more recent materials provide more experiences and perspectives from which to consider *operaismo* and *autonomia* and broaden the period's scholarship.

Almost at the same time, In the beginning of 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine measures in Italy, Italian imprint Derive Approdi released a short text titled "XI tesi sul virus mundi<sup>3</sup>" ("11 Theses on the Global Virus"). It claimed that the "movement's" inability to offer a response to both the pandemic and the government's management of the crisis meant that it was finally over:

After the "left," it is now the so-called "movement" that dies: We're not sorry, its past pathologies were incurable and we were never fond of therapeutic persistence. And, after all, nobody even realized it, because nobody even knew it was still alive. A quick grief gives us the possibility to get over the excuses concerning survival and rebirth. The only life worth living: that which longs to march over the heads of kings, with or without a crown [*corona*].<sup>4</sup>

"The movement" as a sequence of struggles, subjectivities, and informal institutions has remained a force in Italian civic and political life since the '70s, with varying degrees of strength and antagonism. The rhetorical claim of its death has been made numerous times (as has the opposing one), but never from a source with as much legitimacy as Derive Approdi. Derive Approdi has, for the past two decades, carried out

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, Kritik, Derive Approdi [deriveapprodi.com/2020/04/xi-tesi-sul-virus-mundi/](https://www.deriveapprodi.com/2020/04/xi-tesi-sul-virus-mundi/) (24/09/2020)

<sup>4</sup> "XI tesi sul virus mundi," *Kritik*, accessed on September 23, 2020, <https://www.deriveapprodi.com/2020/04/xi-tesi-sul-virus-mundi/>.

extremely thorough documentary and archival work on the historical sources of *operaismo* and *autonomia* and is, as such, firmly embedded in “the movement” and its legacy.

These two moments allow for new critical gestures to be made toward *operaismo* and *autonomia*, including the one I will make in the pages that follow. This thesis aims to read *operaismo* and *autonomia* and their conceptual apparatuses beyond their extant legacy and the mythology that surrounds it. How can antagonism and exile be thought after the historical defeat of these struggles? *Operaismo* and *autonomia* bestow upon us a number of theories that account for capital’s real domination over all spheres of life and a history of struggles which seek to desert such power, along with a profusion of theoretical attempts to explain or justify them. Taking these into account over the course of five chapters, I propose to derive the concept of an *antagonistic gesture* that survives its own ritualization and institutionalization, that dispenses with both a *telos* (an instrumental finality) and an *arché* (a determining grounding).

This inquiry also tasks itself with untangling *operaismo* and *autonomia* from the dominating shadow of Negri and from what came to be known as *post-operaismo*. The goal here is not to rescue a lost integrity or denounce any sort of usurpation, but to resist the attempts to reduce the period to an historical-conceptual prelude to a theory of constituent power, of immaterial labour, or of the multitude. Instead, I read *operaismo* as an attempt to come to terms with the modernization of capital from an antagonistic point of view and, as such, as a first step towards an inquiry into its forms of being and appearance. Consequently, I will address *autonomia* from its limits, from what could not be solved within it. I pursue the missteps, hesitations, and defeats as philosophical problems pertaining to how antagonism can emerge as a political category. Rather than claim a persistent critical validity of the categories drafted within the subjectivities and the struggles of *autonomia*, I aim to repeat its Copernican gesture. Class comes first not as a science of capital, but as a science of class, where class always means class struggle: to see every positive category drafted within *operaismo* and *autonomia* as an expression of antagonism, pregnant with meanings beyond their immediate formulations.

A question lingers here, however: are *operaismo* and *autonomia* a single object, different expressions of a single object, or two different objects altogether? The answer

seems relatively straightforward. Briefly ceding to somewhat questionable sociological categories, *operaismo* was a '60s theoretical current (albeit with political expressions) and *autonomia* was a '70s social movement (albeit with theoretical expressions). To claim that *operaismo*'s conceptual kernel persists in *autonomia* erases not only the variety of positions within them, but also the exceptionality of the political forms that emerged within *autonomia*<sup>5</sup>. However, to fully separate the two of them risks erasing what was particular in *operaismo* and *autonomia* vis-à-vis other contemporaneous experiences. Throughout the thesis, I take this particularity as my subject matter without ever abandoning the crucial distinction between the two, even when I discuss them together.

Tronti's *operaismo* is, above all else, a partisan epistemology whose corollary is the claim that "*conosce veramente chi odia*"<sup>6</sup> (only he/those who hate truly know). This claim does not concern the intensity of the relationship between subject and object, or between researcher and research, rather it pertains to the experience of the "point of view", a seemingly banal concept on which *operaismo* will deposit significant conceptual weight. Tronti's "hate" within the "point of view" as a condition of access to truth speaks of an epistemological methodology that emerges as constitutive of a political distinction between friend and enemy: research fields are constituted through a partisan knowledge, which is useful only for its own will to power. The point of view, rather than an enabling synthesis between subject and methodology, unearths a type of autonomy: not merely the equivalence between subject and object, but already an antagonist position within such equivalence.

My own point of view on *operaismo* and *autonomia* is informed by the ongoing critical debate around the eclipse of the workers' movement and the disappearance of the "worker's identity." I take these as opportunities (albeit tragic ones) to reformulate a communist hypothesis that goes beyond the experiences of socialism and of social democracy and to launch an inquiry into the antagonistic gestures that might make it

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<sup>5</sup> Arguments for a conceptual and objective separation abound. On the one hand, Marcello Tarì, author of *Autonomie!* (2014), claims such a cut is necessary in order to understand what is specific about *autonomia*. On the other hand, Steve Wright, historian of *operaismo* makes the opposite claim: *autonomia*'s excesses taint *operaismo*'s breakthroughs.

<sup>6</sup> Tronti, *Operai e Capitale* (1967) 10.

possible to grasp and think a communism in the present tense. This means the thinking through of a political repertoire that abandons the conceptual framework of the “left” (here taken as a historical experience rather than a political quadrant)<sup>7</sup> to focus on immediate communist measures without a transitional period. This is no magic trick, but requires an answer to the following question: what struggles and positions *already* participate in the experience of communism?

This perspective was once broadly labelled with a fleeting buzzword, “communization<sup>8</sup> theory.” Inasmuch as they still reclaim such title, communization currents are conflicting and contradictory and can be divided into two camps. On the one hand, there are the Marxian communization currents connected to a galaxy of journals including *Endnotes*, *SIC* and *Theorie Communiste*. For the most part, these adhere to a materialist critique of political economy that relies on the categories of exploitation and alienation and on the possibility of the emergence of horizontal proletarian institutions untainted by any form of vanguardism. On the other hand, we have the contemporary currents connected to the legacy of *autonomia* and the offshoots of the French journal *Tiqqun*. Unlike the first, these show little affinity to being perceived as part of a “communization” problematic, but were nevertheless forced into the category. These are openly at odds with any Marxian residue, and opt instead for a theory of capital as command and domination (rather than exploitation and alienation), where politics stop being a voluntarist or militant duty to become ethical and insurrectional forms of life.

Even if the label of communization theory quickly showed its limits, the confrontation between these two camps forms the outline for a possible analysis of the self-conscious forms of contemporary antagonism. On the one hand, because of its Hegelian commitments, communization theory resists validating the self-sufficient immediacy of antagonistic forms of life. It views such immediacy as a symptom of the vain, narcissistic *hubris* of militancy. On the other hand, such accusations of are easily countered: the decaying Grand Hotel Abyss<sup>9</sup> is now but a hall of ghosts, its patrons

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the term “left,” see “History of Separation,” in *Endnotes* 4 (2015), 70-193; and Dyonis Moscolo, *Sur le Sens et L’Usage du Mot Gauche* (Paris: Nouvelles Lignes, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> See *Communization and its Discontents*, ed. Benjamin Noys (London: Minor Compositions, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> “A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence in the ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’ which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as ‘a beautiful

having relocated to a hostel on the outskirts of town, “systematic critique” having become the hobby of graduate students. Beneath all the caricatures and sectarianism, something remains: rather than trying to connect “critique” to “politics” within contemporary class struggles, we rather ought to ask what categories of antagonism’s self-reflection hold purchase today.

*Operaismo* and *autonomia* appear as the context where this question is not only more thoroughly developed, through the manifold attempts to develop a new language of antagonism, but also where a contemporary critical inquiry can problematize the relation established between struggles and their forms of self-perception. If all social, political, and economical categories are to be read as categories of antagonism, then the problem of “a” politics and “a” critique emerge within every such perception. Unlike the aspects of communization theory which affirm a periodization of struggles in which the class refuses a “programmatisation”, a step-by-step recipe for the abolition of capital, in *operaismo* and *autonomia* the program becomes abolition and vice-versa.

### Questions and problems

Pursuing this question through an historical object doesn’t mean that its primary aim is to arrive at an alternative historical understanding of the period (although my work certainly entails this to some extent). Moreover, this thesis also does not seek to affirm itself as the new interpretative orthodoxy on *operaismo* and *autonomia*, nor does it claim to pinpoint their strategic errors and mishaps.

Instead, I seek to, first, limit my analysis to the object’s historicity, to the conceptual tools deployed by and within *autonomia* and *operaismo*. This means that although *autonomia*, and its interpretative memory, resorted to several external philosophical sources—Spinoza and Deleuze, most famously—I won’t address such forays, nor their relevance to the matter at hand.

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hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity” Lukács, Gyorgy. *Preface to Theory of the Novel*, 1962

Second, situating myself exclusively within the conceptual frameworks of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, I aim to elaborate their inner tensions and breaks. One exception to this restriction is Giorgio Agamben, who—to my mind—best problematizes the legacy of the period (though he is referenced). The justification for this privilege rests precisely on Agamben’s calculated distance from the object in question (discussed in chapter V). Rather than read *autonomia* through Agamben, I consider his work as immanent to the problematics emerging from *autonomia* and aim to prove that certain aspects of *autonomia* flow into his work.

A significant part of my research proceeds through a careful study of the period’s materials. Beyond the seminal texts and the historical accounts, I look for the meaning of *operaismo* and *autonomia* in their internal documents, both public and private, and in the minor literature that stretches out over thousands of pamphlets, communiques, magazines, posters, and even comics and street graffiti. I follow the tension between the organized factions of *autonomia* and their “creative” counterparts (thoroughly described in Chapter IV), which is nowhere more explicit than within these forgotten materials. Likewise, the last decade saw the publication of a number of personal memoirs, where lesser known *autonomia* militants tell their stories,<sup>10</sup> full of sound and fury, but also earnestly and tenderly distant from the epic narratives that typically abound.

*Autonomia*’s “minor” literature opens the possibility of a reading of the period which goes beyond the dominant interpretation and against Antonio Negri’s towering figure and the ensuing dominant interpretation. Negri’s important role in developing an *operaismo* that went beyond the centrality of the industrial worker and that included the political forms being rehearsed in the autonomous struggles has made him a hegemonic figure within the historiographical perception of the period. Rather than dispute Negri’s role or relevance, I read *operaismo* and *autonomia* as the confrontation between its major narratives and its minor heterodoxies, which reveal the political apparatuses used by the orthodoxy to advance their reasoning. That is, I take those apparatuses themselves as an object of inquiry. Not an history of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, then, but

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<sup>10</sup> See Stella Allessandro, *Années de Rêves et de Plomb* (Paris: Agone, 2016); Barbara Balzerani, *Compagna Luna* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2013).



an inquiry into the forms of self-consciousness through which autonomous struggles came to perceive themselves as social forms.

This original plan for this thesis was grounded on a confrontation between *operaismo*'s refusal of Hegel and Hegelian inspired critiques of *operaismo*. The effort to systematize these positions and their inherent points of contention ran into mirroring problems: on the one hand, a fully cohesive and overarching engagement with Hegel didn't exist within the literature of the period<sup>11</sup> bracketing my research. The movement had more pressing concerns than to produce theory in such scholarly models. On the other hand, the critiques of *operaismo* and *autonomia* grounded on a Hegelian corpus were either too close or too distant to the events to have a clear picture of what was happening: either deeply entrenched within a particular faction of *autonomia* or, in alternative, fully detached from any proper knowledge of the period and its history either by temporal or language barriers<sup>12</sup>.

I quickly decided to discard the immediate options stemming from this impasse. The first would be to reconstruct an overarching Negrian critique of Hegel, producing a thorough systematization of the post-*operaismo* party-line on Hegel. The other would be the mirroring effort: to finally systematize the ultimate Hegelian critique of *autonomia* and *operaismo*, filling the blanks left open. Neither satisfied me, either in personal or critical terms, inasmuch as they both failed to properly address my interest in the period and its problematics. Both seemed to embody the positions against which the object itself stood against, spinning around an idea of the period which contrasted with how it increasingly played out in the numerous emerging historical documents.

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<sup>11</sup> Tronti, and especially Negri, did entail a thorough reading of Hegel, but throughout this period (65-80) never produced a wide-ranging systematized account of such reading. Negri wrote numerous essays on Hegel during his early academic career, and again during the 90s, but these do not directly concern the problematics of *operaismo per se*.

<sup>12</sup> An exception to this is Ricardo Bellofiore's and Massimiliano Tomba's introduction to the Italian edition of Steve Wright's *Storming Heaven*. Bellofiore and Tomba repeat Wright's interpretation, in which Negri's abandonment of the classical figure of the *mass worker* ultimately conducts *operaismo* into an *irrationalist* turn. That Tronti and Negri simply forgo any theory of commodity fetishism and alienation is also hinted at, but not discussed at length.

Even if not at first, this open space revealed itself to be the proper site for philosophical inquiry and problematization. Only through progressively setting aside Hegelianism and anti-Hegelianism as objects was I able to properly entail the conceptual path towards a problematization of *autonomia* that, even though evidently sympathetic, was neither immersed in an attempt to vindicate its positions nor in negating them, but rather in extracting their conceptual meaning.

The irony, of course, is how a thesis that starts as a project on the refusal of Hegel ends up repeating and enacting such a Hegelian gesture, not only conceptually, but even methodologically. Not only do I attempt to chart the flight of Minerva's owl out of the smoldering remains of a failed revolution, but the dynamics of such flight are analyzed through an immanent critique of the relation between the conceptual and historical apparatus of *autonomia* and its historical events. Hegel indeed waited behind unsuspecting corners.

The nature of any research, especially of a PhD thesis, tentatively explains this. As an object that develops into the researcher's often first major written work, a proper consideration of its form and process of becoming is indeed only evident once it is finished. Only when one can map the processes, impasses, hidden causalities, and breakthroughs in their relation and systematization towards a final form does this form truly show itself for what it is. As such, perhaps more than in any other ensuing project, the tentative grasping for a research and speculative method is unknowingly slowly ingrained into the thesis exposition. A PhD thesis is as much a reworked research travel log, a "travel literature" of sorts, as it is the presentation of a concrete position on a concrete problem. That an inquiry *operaismo* and *autonomia* that worked through an inquiry into Hegel tentatively assumes a Hegelian methodology is not so much a problem as a methodological event: to address a question through going through the question, to embody its positions until they are grasped, negated, and then surpassed, or, perhaps more honestly, set aside for numerous returns. That is an element of Hegelian procedure one can fully assume, if not as method, then as a lingering problem.

That choice, however, is not to be justified merely by contingency or by the seduction of method. The claim that part of the sense of *autonomia* and *operaismo* is to be made retrospectively does not ultimately rest on any abstract necessity. The choice of

using contemporary concepts (constituent and destituent power) to unlock a rewriting of a past period, claiming these were latent conceptual claims, waiting to finally emerge as such, rests on the possibility that the essence, so to speak, of a movement comes not at its climax, but throughout its entire arch of emergence, explosion, defeat, and disappearance.

The conceptual task waiting once the movement ended was not only to make its claims applicable beyond the context of the Italian 60s and 70s, through positing the conceptual and abstract forms of its perseverance. Rather, what was missing was a way to understand how such an ending was already part of the entire process and how the limits and problems of the movement were woven into its development, irrespective of the periodization to be made of it. Constituent power and several other terms of the Negrian corpus are an attempt to turn the singularity of *autonomia* into a political ontology, as if a concept of the political could be grounded in a historical climax shorn of its ensuing moments. Giorgio Agamben's concept of destituent power, on the contrary, allows the possibility of recanting the singularity of *autonomia* from the abstract dimension of a general politics. It does so not through active or direct engagement with any remaining historical element of the *operaismo/autonomia* canon, but through the pursuit of the conceptual possibility of a power that undoes and abolishes without presupposing any new order in return. It follows that the historical sense of the period is to be found not only through its obvious ramifications, but also in spite of them. Agamben's work, always deliberately marking a minute distance from any explicit political formulation (and hence, also, from the attempt to turn the experience of the 70s into a set of political norms and guidelines) is situated precisely at this threshold of historical reflection where temporal distance becomes a form of negation. That is to say, "destituent power" is less a concept that comes *after* *autonomia* but rather something that was always present, even if it wasn't conceptualized as such. Whereas Negri synthesizes all that was obvious in *autonomia* into a theory of constituent power (a legitimate and worthy historical operation), Agamben, indirectly, unearths plenty of what wasn't obvious but was, nevertheless, thoroughly latent.

There is, however, another latent philosophical problem being worked through this thesis, which rotates around the problem of political ontology, i.e., of a question of ontologic difference playing out within the concept of the political, of an attempt to

rescue a sense of the political from its apparent decay. *Operaismo*'s kickoff gesture—Tronti's "Copernican turn": class struggle comes first—establishes a field of political difference. Much like Heidegger's ontological difference sought to differentiate the ontological meaning of being from the ontic qualities of beings, political difference seeks to make the political distinct from politics. In other words, it seeks to think, rescue (and restore) an ontological principle that stands anterior and contrary to the ontic determinations of politics, understood as a politics of institutional mediation and subsumption. *Operaismo* unfolds thoroughly as the search for materialization of new forms of political being which attempt to find and substantiate the meaning of the political.

Adorno's critique of ontological difference<sup>13</sup> is illuminating here: the question of being, of ontological difference, only emerges when philosophy starts being increasingly stripped of scientific concerns, being left with only the question of being, which is then isolated from whatever ontic determinations. A political ontology, then, would follow the political as it is increasingly stripped of its capacities (these being separated and captured as economy, as governmentality, as mediation, as cybernetics, etc.) and seeks to find its ground within the unfolding antagonism and materiality of modern social relations. Rather than merely following the Heideggerian/Schmittian/Trontian gesture, or, on the other hand, its Hegelian/Adornian critique, what is drawn throughout this these pages is an attempt to carry on an immanent critique of political ontology: to follow the political gesture as it seeks its concrete determinations away from "politics" as such, while arguing that such concrete determinations are precisely what will be capable of negating the presupposition of an ontology of the political. Hence the two-fold nature of the thesis: while it is in the first part that we see how the refusal of labour becomes a social form that tendentially expresses itself in the movement of *autonomia*, it is with the second part of the thesis that we arrive at an understanding of the logic of the struggles of *autonomia* as moving beyond and against their historical, formal, and conceptual limits. In other words, to pursue an ontological sense of the political, against politics, in order to then ultimately question such unearthed principles of the political.

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<sup>13</sup> See Adorno, Theodor, *Ontology and Dialectics*. (Oxford: Polity. 2019)

An obvious lacuna in this thesis is the Marxian faction of the women's movement and an account of the several splits occurring within Italian feminism of the 60s and 70s, a lacuna more evident by the attention given to its opposing current, the "feminism of difference". The explosion of feminist practices in the 70s not only followed the dynamics of the movement, but it also determined them, inasmuch as the "end of groups", a fundamental moment in the development of *autonomia*, can be said to have happened due to the sound and intense criticism the group form was subjected by feminist critique. The scissions between a feminist theory of social reproduction and a feminism of difference thoroughly follow the lines of tension that run across *autonomia*, and our argument could therefore have been exclusively centered on an analysis of such discussions. It is not so, however, for two reasons. The first is that the unfolding of the aforementioned "Copernican turn" happens before the emergence of a specific feminist reading and use of the tools it provided, and hence the limited space of the thesis prioritized a general description of such tools rather than their specific use within social reproduction theory (which, it is suggested in this claim, is then subject to the same order of problems drawn within *operaismo* and *post-operaismo*<sup>14</sup>). The second is that the intense problematization of social relations done by the feminism of difference is all more powerful when read against the general practices of *autonomia* rather than just the feminist movement. Whereas social reproduction theory uses and develops *operaismo*'s conceptual tools towards a critique of male supremacy, the feminism of difference unleashes a furious reversal of *operaismo* and *autonomia* against the political forms that sustain them.

This choice also partly explains why I engage in a relatively limited fashion with previous English scholarship on *autonomia* and *operaismo*. Steve Wright's work on the period is illuminating and thoroughly researched, synthesizing a prodigious amount of information into a coherent history of the period. That said, with respect to both the methodology and historical vantage point from which *operaismo* and *autonomia* are assessed, Wright's seminal *Storming Heaven* (2002)<sup>15</sup> inadvertently obscures precisely the object I aim to shed attention upon.

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<sup>14</sup> See "The Logic of Gender" in Endnotes 3. (London: 2013)

<sup>15</sup> Steve Wright has two forthcoming books which might address the critique here suggested. *The Year of Living Dangerously: Italy's Movement of 77* (With Jacopo Galimberti), forthcoming on Verso, and *The Weight of the Printed Word: Text, Context and Militancy in Operaismo*, forthcoming on Brill. Given the quality

*Storming Heaven* reads the history of the period as unfolding through the formal and informal institutions that emerged out of *operaismo*, drawing with minute care and precision the intense internal debates of the early journals (*Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*) and the later organizations (*Potere Operaio*, *Lotta Continua*). Wright's argument traces *operaismo*'s coming into being and ultimate decline into an alleged "irrationality" as it loses sight of the *operai* and starts to delve around itself, seemingly forcing its analytical categories into a theory of history and into increasingly incoherent political forms.

While sound in general terms<sup>16</sup>, Wright's usage of a problematic of "irrationality" loses sight of the social forms taking place beyond their institutional hypostatization; as if the historical and social unfolding of the period was but the outcome of the chess moves of key organizations and their major players, and as if those elements of alleged "irrationality" weren't an expression of something happening beyond the movement's institutions. My inquiry is organized around what lies beyond the cast of characters and acronyms canonized in Wright's history. It understands what Wright deems to be "irrational" as a complex social form, wholly coherent with the conceptual problematics emerging from it. The critical effort to posit such a social form as *movement* reads the limits of *operaismo* and *autonomia* not as limits of their pundits, but as limits of the social forms themselves.

The process through which some of the *operaismo*-influenced organizations eventually distanced themselves from the figure of the *operai*, or from an idea of the working-class, is not something to bestow on Toni Negri—even considering the eventual limits of his role as political leader—but something to interpret as a general tendency within the movement itself—or even on the class itself. *Operaismo*'s orthodoxy always hinged on the distinction between class and labour-force, i.e., between class as

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of Wright's (and Galimberti's) scholarship on the period, their publication will surely constitute a welcomed addition to the period's literature, in any language.

<sup>16</sup> Wright's claim that once Negri abandons the "mass worker"—the factory subject—*operaismo* becomes irrational and centered on itself does address a complex transformation within *operaismo* (that Tronti, for example, will also make) but the form of the claim is itself debatable if not theoretically questionable: Negri could just as easily claim that to remain clung to such figure was in itself a form of self-centeredness.

friend/enemy threshold and working class as a cultural identity. *Operaismo* and its many developments are in many ways readable as a rupture with Marx that goes beyond what Negri accounted for. The rejection of Marxism was in many ways not only a rejection of Engels' and Kautsky's readings of Marx, but of the very idea of "Marxism" as class culturalism, as a compendium of cultural and social traits, irrespective of their political or critical reach.

The process through which this refusal is readable through the categories advanced in this thesis is precisely what is absent in Wright's volume: the autonomy of movement *vis à vis* all previous class sociology is not a symptom of any apparent irrationality, but an object of inquiry through and through.

### Chapter outline

The thesis will proceed through two lines of inquiry, expressed in two parts. The first will ground *operaismo* and *autonomia* within its own discussion of Marx's critique of political economy. Rather than proving the Marxian legitimacy of *operaismo* or Marx's relevance to *operaismo*'s political project, what I will show is how the tension between the Marxian corpus and *operaismo* (and its subsequent development in *autonomia*) outlines a concrete political problem that is based on the relation between antagonism, use, and common being. At the heart of this problem are the ambiguities of Marx's concept of labour, which *operaismo* took up as complex in themselves: labour's double nature, at once ontological essence and structure of alienation, led *operaismo* to conclude that labour is an apparatus of command to be refused. Such refusal became a historical social form that tendentially expressed itself through increasingly antagonistic proletarian conducts, which sought their own social forms. Such social forms, however, if they are to uphold their political purpose, cannot be grounded within a purported autonomy of the elements that *operaismo* reads as antagonist within the critique of political economy, such as use. Against Negri, I argue that such antagonism does not imply a constituent autonomy. Rather, such forms express themselves through a destituent effort, one that aims to suspend and deactivate power, rather than seize it.

Part II explores such a destituent ontology from within *autonomia*'s struggles. What connects their manifold concrete expressions—the numerous currents, positions,

subjectivities and factions of the area of extra-parliamentary struggles—are the attempts to undo, suspend and deactivate the apparatuses of command and domination. Counterintuitively, and contrary to any immediate grasp of the period’s family trees, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben best grasps and develops this problematic. Even if removed from *operaismo*’s immediate canon, Agamben’s work can be read as a direct answer to the many limits of *autonomia* as a revolutionary movement. Using Agamben’s analysis of messianism, I put forward the concept of negative care, which comprehends and develops the overarching problematic of *operaismo* and *autonomia* that I trace throughout the entirety of the thesis.

The first chapter will address the oscillations in Marx’s concept of labour, demonstrating how *operaismo* developed a theory of the refusal of labour that placed antagonism at the core of the critique of political economy. I argue that the antinomies of Marx’s concept of labour mirror the antinomies of the political action of the workers’ movement itself, where labour became an unstable category that encompasses its own negation. The act of the refusal of labour emerges periodically in different forms. *Operaismo* fully grasps this tension and its historical modalities, affirming them as a concrete movement struggling to come into its own.

The second chapter details how Negri reads the categories of the critique of political economy from the standpoint of the social form of the refusal of labour in order to help further the self-consciousness of the burgeoning autonomous struggles. Negri claims that the law of value has collapsed after the post-war transformations in the modes of capital accumulation, hence making use-value autonomous from exchange value: immediate forms of proletarian use are now possible in workers’ struggles, something Negri will call “self-valorization.” This concept, however, reconstructs, within *autonomia*, the same vulgar dialectics of production that Negri sets out to refuse in the first place. Against Negri, I argue that real subsumption entails a suspension of dialectical subjectivation rather than its programmatic refusal, and that one can grasp in this suspension both an element of exteriority to capital and *autonomia*’s political kernel.

The third chapter will show how the movement of *autonomia* understood itself as subject and object through the framework of *operaismo*, and how Negri sought to derive an insurrectionary form of the party from that self-consciousness, one that reunited class



autonomy and the movement's multiplicity on the basis of a fixed political ontology. However, once again *contra* Negri, I propose a contrasting understanding of movement, grasping non-determination as an expression of a partisan communist becoming.

The fourth chapter proposes destituent power as the common element throughout *autonomia's* gestures of violence and exile, even if the movement never truly understood them as such. For despite their different material expressions, the structural logic of *autonomia's* antagonistic gestures was grounded on a practice of undoing that contrasted with the affirmative *telos* of most of its political action.

Finally, the last chapter presents parts of Giorgio Agamben's work as it directly relates to the political problems left open by *autonomia* as a movement and as a historical event. Instead of interpreting destituent power as an aporetic riddle that cuts across the Western political tradition (Agamben's position), I take *autonomia* as a concrete problematic of destituent power that directly concerned itself with a political ethics. By outlining the limits of Agamben's concept with reference to the practices of *autonomia*, I'll define a concept of care that embodies destituent power. Here, I modify Elsa Dorlin's concept of "negative care" to get at the heart of *autonomia's* gestures of destituent antagonism. To close this thesis, I will present such care as a gesture of the dissolution of command.

## Part I: Antagonism

### Chapter I. The refusal of labour and “the party of anarchy”

One of the best films about class conflict includes a ten-minute sharp and biting shot, taken on June 10, 1968, outside the gates of the Wonder factory—a battery-maker—on the outskirts of Paris. Most of the workers were unskilled, low-paid, looked-down-upon women, often handling dirty chemicals. They’d been on strike since May 13th and were just about to go back in. What concessions they’d snatched from the boss were a lot in terms of better work conditions, and little compared to the energy put into the struggle. In the middle of the arguing group is a woman in her twenties—half shouting, half crying—who won’t be talked into returning: “No, I’m not going back. I’ll never set foot there again! Go and see for yourself what a shit-hole it is . . . what filth we work in . . .” In 1996, a documentary interviewed people involved in that strike: men and women workers, foremen, a Trotskyist typist, shop stewards, union activists, the local Communist Party leader who tried to convince the young woman to resume work. She, however, is untraceable. Few remember her well. She left the factory soon after the events and nobody knows what became of her, or even her full name, only the first one: Jocelyne.

Gilles Dauvé, *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*. 1973<sup>1</sup>

The problematic of the refusal of labour in the communist currents of the 60s and 70s appears to meet two limits: the impossibility of conceiving a life free from drudgery and necessity and the difficulty of tackling the problem of sustaining social reproduction through new forms of labour organizing. Conceptually and politically, the refusal of labour is often viewed as a desperate, romantic, or nihilistic posture that cannot do more than present a faint glimmer of resistance and dignity in face of totalizing power. “I would

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<sup>1</sup> Dauvé, Gilles. *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*. (Oakland, CA: PM, 2015). 19.

rather not<sup>2</sup>” or “*Ne travaillez jamais*”<sup>3</sup>. Ethical cries incapable of any significant social transformation.

Likewise, the repertoire of struggles associated with the refusal of labour—wildcat strikes, absenteeism, rioting, and so on—were denounced throughout the long history of the workers’ movement as disorganized, anarchistic, depoliticized, or “Blanquist.” In all their sound and fury, they were seen as spontaneist and dangerous adventures capable of jeopardizing the more consequent efforts of workers’ institutions and their political stakes. The partiality of such struggles, even when carried out by legitimate agents—workers—risked endangering the advances made by the class as whole and upsetting the arrangement of proletarian forces between institutional and geopolitical blocs.

But the reluctance to conceptually address the explosion of such struggles in the 60s and 70s<sup>4</sup> cannot deny their pervasive impact on contemporary political discourse.<sup>5</sup> Not only was the refusal of labour a dominant sentiment within segments of the industrial working class,<sup>6</sup> and not only did it become a structuring point within new social movements at the time, but it also seemed to tap into a more widespread feeling: that most people loathe their daily occupation and have a very clear perception of how their lives are organized around such an absurdity.

At the level of theory, this chasm between the struggles against labour and their dismissal by the dominant institutions of the workers’ movement is further complicated by the status of the category of labour in Marx’s thought. The workers’ movement coalesced around Engels and Kautsky’s systematization of Marx’s thought after his death and consequently affirmed labour as the fundamental ontological essence of

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<sup>2</sup> For Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, or Antonio Negri, the political intensity of the refusal of labour emerges in the opaque but total resistance that Herman Melville’s character Bartleby expresses when responding to every demand that he entails any kind of action with “I would rather not”.

<sup>3</sup> “Never Work”. Sorbonne graffiti attributed to Guy Debord.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the accounts about Detroit’s black union DRUM and its historical similarities to the Italian situation. See *Detroit I do Mind dying*, Dan Georgakas.

<sup>5</sup> See Snircek, Nick and Williams, Alex. *Postcapitalism and a world without work* (2016); Mason, Paul. *Post-capitalism: a guide to our future*. (2015) or Graeber, David *Bullshit Jobs* (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Arguably, throughout the entire history of the workers movement—see Karl Heinz Roth, *L’Altro movimento operaio* or “History of Separation,” *Endnotes Journal* #4.

humanity. Labour thus grounded the very possibility of historical change through revolutionary emancipation. Within this interpretation, the refusal of labour appears as an undialectical element within the historical play of class struggle, since it quite evidently collapses the development of productive forces.

In Marx's thought, labour is indeed posited as the ontological essence and drive of historical being, but this category is far from fixed in its meaning. More than any other concrete concept, labour in Marx is an aporetic historical problematic. In 1844 Marx posits labour as the essence of man while suggesting that such labour has never actually, truly existed. However, in Volume I of *Capital* Marx distinguishes between two concepts of labour: one historical (alienated, producing exchange-value), the other transhistorical (as human activity producing use-values). Whereas in 1844 non-alienated labour has never existed, in 1867 it has always existed, albeit in a latent form. The post-war collapse of the workers' movement and the explosion of struggles around the refusal of labour show that Marx's shifting positions are in fact a telling sign of a still open question.

This chapter will draw a concise overview of Marx's shifting conceptualization of labour in order to show how *operaismo* read Marx *against Marxism* to develop a theory of the refusal of labour, reading the antagonism in such refusal into the Marxian critique of political economy. It will argue that the antinomies of Marx's concept of labour as read by *operaismo* aren't due to any theoretical or conceptual mishap, around which one could rescue a "true" Marxian concept of labour (or of its refusal); instead, these antinomies express the political action of the workers' movements themselves and hence constitute labour as an unstable category, one that encompasses its own negation. Consequently, as a social form, the refusal of labour emerges from time to time in different forms of appearance. *Operaismo* fully grasps these tensions and their historical modalities, affirming them as a concrete movement struggling to come into its own.

## I. The antinomies of labour

Labour<sup>7</sup> is posited throughout Marx's early thought as humanity's *species-being*: as a productive activity that objectifies nature and constitutes a human specificity *vis à vis* nature itself. Humanity objectifies nature by using its concrete elements, processes, and capacities—and becomes subject to such objects in turn. In this way, humanity establishes a world of technology and wealth that in turn shapes its material and social life. In using nature as an object, humans also gain the capacity to use themselves as objects. Their existence is transformed as they metabolically mediate their own relation to nature.<sup>8</sup>

Since the terms of such mediation rest on natural necessities, the limits of the individual metabolic relation drawn within the state of nature makes humans assume a “passive bond” amongst themselves, where “other men” are both a need and their “greatest wealth.”<sup>9</sup> Humanity's *species-being* is then not only a constitutive mediation between humanity and nature, but also, inherently, a mediation between humans themselves.

The unfolding of these mediations occurs within a social sphere, where they assume the form of institutional and symbolic representations. That labour grounds the essence of humanity does not mean that such activity must always appear within the same social forms, nor that previous forms of labour were necessarily mere anticipatory variations of the present social form of labour. *Species-being* rests on the emergence of human technologies that build upon themselves through the dialectical constitution of material and social institutions. This is precisely what distinguishes the specificity of human relations from the processes through which nature is an object to itself. Being a social relation, *species-being* unfolds through a dynamic tension into new

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<sup>7</sup> Engels famously notes how in the English language it is easy to distinguish “labour” from “work,” the first being alienated labour, the second an anthropological reproductive function. Such distinction accommodates the general sense that the concept of labour would assume after the *Grundrisse* and that would persevere in Marxism, as we will come to see.

<sup>8</sup> Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) in Marx, Karl, *Early Writings*. (London: Penguin 1975), 327.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

determinations. The evolution of humanity's technical-metabolic relation with nature has no transhistorical ground. Instead, the institutional and symbolic expressions of the social forms of labour develop through moments of continuity and rupture.

Such forms of social life appear as nature, as chained to a realm of necessity, despite being contingent on the particularities of each juncture of the social relations of production. Inasmuch as such contingent manifestations of labour as *species-being* are naturalized within each historical stage, Marx claims that processes of production have thus far been determined by reified social objects that always presuppose their own necessity. Labour has always been alienated labour, a labour whose goal is the reproduction of whatever institutions rule over the representations of humanity's metabolic relation with nature.<sup>10</sup>

Alienation, however, is not the mere constitution of abstract sovereign institutions; it is also a process through which wealth is externalized from human bodily and sensual experience—from an “immediate sense of life”<sup>11</sup>—to assume a hostile and despotic form. This process is cumulative and continuous: “the worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent. (...) [T]his fact simply means that the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Although the case can be made that a non-alienated labour exists in primitive communism, in the sense that it is neither waged nor immersed within a feudal context, Marx would still contend that such labour is still very much organized around the religious institutions that organized social life. If, as claimed in the *Economical and Political Manuscripts*, atheism is communism's first form of appearance—in that *species-being* truly appears to itself as itself—then primitive communism would still be inherently alienated and non-alienated labour would be contingent on the abolition of capitalism (as dialectical outcome of the historical modes of production that preceded it). We see this in *The German Ideology*: “We see here that this natural religion or this particular relation of men to nature is determined by the form of society and vice versa. Here, as everywhere, the identity of nature and men appears in such a way that the restricted relation of men to nature determines their restricted relation to one another, and their restricted relation to one another determines men's relation to nature.” Marx, *The German Ideology* (1932 [1845]) in Marx, *Selected Writings*, 1977. 183.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), 325.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 323-4.

Alienation does not simply take place *post-factum*, in the moment when the fruits of labour are taken from their immediate enjoyment and organized as a hostile force. That is, alienation “manifest[s] itself not only in the result, but also in the act of production, within the activity of production itself (...) So if the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation. The estrangement of the object of labour merely summarizes the estrangement, the alienation in the activity of labour itself.”<sup>13</sup> That is, labour itself is devoid of personal meaning as it is the hostile objectification that sets social life against itself.

Marx, as explained further on, would develop certain aspects of alienation into a theory of exploitation and the expropriation of surplus-value. However, his early writings are bound to a critique of labour that goes beyond the unequal distribution of its fruits. Labour as *species-being* can only be conceived as potentiality rather than as a given. It is the history of the successive stages of alienation that reveals the possibility of, against them, positing a relation between subject and object, between humanity and nature, that does not rest upon abstract institutions: to attain its actuality, the concept of labour as *species-being* requires the refusal of these institutions. Marx grounds modern subjectivity on a continuous hostile objectification that nevertheless carries within itself a potential for freedom. Such emancipation would consist in the process through which labour’s subject-object relation acquires a self-conscience which unveils the alienation at the core of the abstract institutions ruling social life.

This problematic becomes more complicated in the *Grundrisse* as Marx historicizes his ontology of labour through a renewed critique of the category of labour. Labour, conceived abstractly, is a “simple category” that appears “immeasurably old;” however, when conceived in terms of its materiality, labour is “a category as modern as the relations that create this simple abstraction.”<sup>14</sup> Within political economy, labour appears as a transhistorical category only inasmuch as its current determinations are projected upon a discontinuous past.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>14</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. (1857) (London; Penguin 1993), 104.

This opens two questions. On the one hand, any concept of labour presupposes the creation of wealth—goods necessary to the satisfaction of social needs. In the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx draws a historical sequence of the conceptual relation between these elements. He begins with money, where wealth is located objectively as an external element, progresses on to the physiocratic notion of agriculture as the wealth creating element, and ends with Adam Smith’s “immense step forward”: “to throw out every limiting specification of wealth creating activity—not only manufacturing, or commercial or agricultural labour, but one as well as others.”<sup>15</sup> Labour becomes “labour in general.” When wealth creating activity becomes universally abstract, altogether equivalent in itself, it may seem the “abstract expression for the simplest and most ancient relation where human beings—in whatever form of society—play the role of producers.” But, according to Marx, this is mistaken:

Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant. As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone. On the other side, this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form. (...) The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.<sup>16</sup>

Marx’s previous consideration that non-alienated labour has never existed gains a new sense: the mere existence of an abstract concept of labour already entails its alienation due to the subsumption of all different concrete labours under a single abstract form. The manifold human metabolic relations with nature have not been

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



graspable as a single abstract activity until the rise of capitalism. This is because the historical unfolding of labour as more and more abstract has resulted in a specifically capitalist social form of labour—labour as a form of subjectivation, as the process through which a concrete form of productivity is inscribed into the very fabric of subjectivity—and the process of quantification (as wealth) of its products.

But on the other hand, the historicization of labour fissures the concept, for it assumes a historical persistence in the concept of labour which contrasts with a categorical division between alienated and non-alienated labour. The manifold statements concerning the abolition of labour that abound in *The German Ideology* (1845) and in the *Comments on Friedrich List* (1845) do find a continuity in the *Grundrisse*, but they appear alongside a celebration of labour as a “liberating activity” capable of “self-realization, objectification of the subject, and hence real freedom.”<sup>17</sup> If labour is not a transhistorical category, but one whose current meaning is unearthed through a historical unfolding of its abstract sense (abstraction being not a transhistorical category either, but a modern social form) then for Marx the possibility emerges that that very same unfolding is capable of positing a different form of labour, a non-alienated labour.

This possibility finds its systematization through the concepts of concrete and abstract labour first presented in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Concrete labour produces use-values, meaning goods that satisfy concrete needs. Abstract labour, on the contrary, produces exchange-value, an abstract measure of wealth whose sole function is as a general equivalent between commodity exchanges under the capitalist mode of production. The contrast is clear, where non-alienated labour has never existed, concrete labour “is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature and therefore human life itself.”<sup>18</sup>

This new ahistorical conception of labour, concrete labour, hinges on the radical discontinuity internal to the concept. Within Marx, labour assumes such an ontological

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<sup>17</sup> Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*. (1857) (London; Penguin 1993), 614.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, Karl (1867), *Capital—A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume One. (London: Penguin Books), 133.

substance inasmuch as its historical forms never constitute anything more than ephemeral expressions of the metabolic relation with nature. Marx's intuition of the manifold forms of alienation grounds a perception of the common element persistent within them. But by framing it this way, Marx opens the possibility of an antinomy that stands against his critical project: that the subjectivation implied in *species-being* can be read as a process of constitutive social legitimation, where one is a subject only inasmuch as one is socially recognized for one's productivity. The becoming subject implicit in *species-being* is transformed into a process of social normativity. In other words, *species-being* now appears in two ways: as an open ontological condition that always stands within and against the unfolding of the abstractions of labour, or, on the contrary, as a normative and abstract process tending towards the construction of new institutions.

Marxism, here understood as the readings of Marx organized by Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky after his death, fully assumed this constitutive and transhistorical understanding of labour. Kautsky, in his commentary to the 1891 Erfurt program of the German Social Democratic Party (SDP),<sup>19</sup> which was enthusiastically celebrated by Engels as an improvement over the Gotha program,<sup>20</sup> establishes a morality of labour that erases the subtle dialectics of *species-being* within a full-blown teleological and normative crusade. Labour's dimension of subjectivation is maintained, but mediated through the same political, productive, and cultural institutions that Marx viewed as responsible for alienation. Kautsky suggests that the moral value of industrial labour elevated the degenerate proletarian masses to legitimate political subjects. The metabolic relation of subjectivation implicit in Marx's concept of labour is transformed into a process of social and moral validation. Capitalist industrial development and the concern for poverty shown by parts of the ruling class awakened the class-consciousness of the destitute proletariat, which then began its slow but steady progress through

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<sup>19</sup> Kautsky, Karl. The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program) (1892) in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1892/erfurt/>.

<sup>20</sup> Lenin would address Engel's commentary as essentially negative in *The State and Revolution* (1917). Engels does criticize aspects of it, but remains favorable to the ten-point program. See Engels, Friedrich. "A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Plan of 1891 in <https://www.connexions.org/CxArchive/MIA/marx/works/1891/06/29.htm>.

existing institutions. Kautsky argues that Marx and Engel's contribution to the workers' cause is the following:

The socialists are no longer expected to discover a new and free social order; all they have to do is discover the elements of such an order in existing society. They need no longer attempt to bring to the proletariat salvation from above. On the other hand, it becomes their duty to support the working-class in its constant struggle by encouraging its political and economic institutions. It must do all in its power to hasten the day when the working-class will be able to save itself.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas for the early Marx such abstract institutions were precisely the hypostatization of alienation, here they are understood as part of an overarching historical process where they will deterministically enable the working class to ascend to power. Kautsky does not affirm the existence of a non-alienated labor as such, since the question is not even posed in such terms, but he does posit a form of social progress and emancipation that takes place within the process of labour itself:

As the self-respect of the proletarians mounts higher, as does also the respect paid them by the other classes of society. They begin to regard themselves as the equals of the upper classes and to compare the conditions of the other strata of society with their own. They make greater demands on society, demands for better clothes, better dwellings, greater knowledge and the education of their children. They wish to have some share in the achievements of modern civilization. And they feel with increasing keenness every set-back, every new form of oppression. This moral elevation of the proletariat is identical with the increasing demands which it makes on society.<sup>22</sup>

The critique of alienated labour disappears beneath the outrage for the unfair distribution of its fruits. The social meaning of production is indeed present, inasmuch as society is understood as the social, political, and cultural expression of an accumulation of wealth, as a cumulative civilizational process whose material gains express themselves in ever more developed institutional frameworks. However, the antagonistic dimension of this process, the necessary separation and alienation that it requires, is

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<sup>21</sup> Kautsky. "Erfurt Program" (1892).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

transformed into a positive dialectics where emancipation amounts to the inclusion of workers in civil society.

If communism is the abolition of alienated labour, it cannot rest on fairer allocation of the current alienated means of creating wealth. Marx is adamant in distinguishing communism from other forms of communalism that he deems “crude communism”, which includes:

(...) A generalization and completion of the relation of private property. [A] Domination of material property bulks so large that it threatens to destroy everything which is not capable of being possessed by everyone as private property. Physical, immediate possession is the only purpose of life and existence as far as this communism is concerned; the category of worker is not abolished but extended to all men; the relation of private property remains the relation of the community to the world of things (...) this communism, inasmuch as it negates the personality of men in every sphere, is simply the logical expression of the private property which is this negation. (...) For crude communism, the community is simply a community of labor and equality of wages, which are paid out by communal capital, the community as universal capitalist. Both sides of the relation are raised to an imaginary universality–labour as the condition in which everyone is placed and capital as the acknowledged universality and power of the community (...) Crude communism is only a manifestation of the vileness of private property trying to establish itself as the positive community<sup>23</sup>.

Marx foresees the historical dynamic between the workers’ movement and capital developing into institutional and governmental forms. In defining crude communism as a “false historical movement,” in that it does not carry out the “the positive supersession of private property as human self-estrangement, and hence true appropriation of the human essence through and for man<sup>24</sup>” necessary to communism proper, Marx affirms true communism as the following: “The entire movement of history is therefore both the actual act of creation of communism–the birth of its empirical existence–and, for its thinking consciousness, the comprehended and known movement of its becoming<sup>25</sup>.”

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<sup>23</sup> Marx, 1844 in Marx (1975), 346.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

The historical logic of such becoming assumes different expressions within Marx's thought. What is invariant throughout, however, is the struggle between classes. If it is necessary that the supersession of capitalism involves a rupture which abolishes the abstract forms of private property and value, then, as Marx claims in "The Class Struggles in France": "such a revolution is possible when both these factors, the modern productive forces and the bourgeois productive forms come in collision with each other"<sup>26</sup>. The dialectical movement of communism is a collision between classes, but such a collision never appears as a struggle between alienated and non-alienated labour (since it does not exist as such). Marx hints at this in *The German Ideology*:

In all previous revolutions up till now the mode of activity always remained unscathed and it was only a question of a different distribution of this activity, a new distribution of labour to other persons, while the communist revolution is directed against the preceding mode of activity, does away with labour, and abolishes the rule of all classes with the classes themselves, because it is carried through by a class which no longer counts as a class in society, it is not recognized as a class, and is in itself the expression of the dissolution of all classes, nationalities, etc. within present society.<sup>27</sup>

Marx's critical project is geared precisely against the political use of abstract and undialectical categories such as non-alienated labour. Much to the contrary, capital's demise will take place through the political expression of its inner contradictions as they logically unfold. As such, an actual existing element of non-alienated labour is not logically necessary, since it is precisely the material reality of class struggle that will come to take the dialectical steps towards communism. But this also means that the "development of productive forces"<sup>28</sup> is not a category of production *per se*, but rather a political category that exists inside and against the abstraction of production. Such would be a possible first definition of the refusal of labour that does not rest on the valorization

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<sup>26</sup> Marx. *The Class Struggles in France* (1849), 321.

<sup>27</sup> Marx, Karl, *The German Ideology* (1846), 195.

<sup>28</sup> In the *German Ideology* (1846) 177, Marx affirms that "'Liberation' is a historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions, the development of industry, commerce, agriculture, the conditions of intercourse". "The development of productive forces" would become a byword meaning the necessity of a socialist-driven modernization of the productive apparatuses and hence arguing for the participation of the workers movement in capitalist development.

of rest, play, or leisure. Rather, the refusal of labour in class struggle appears as a process unfolding within and against production.

The lingering problem of the proper relation between alienated and non-alienated labour can as such be posed again. Either labour overcomes its own inner contradictions or the category collapses into an open antagonism whose determinations fall beyond the category of labour, meaning, they become the refusal of labour.

Marx's antinomies of labour come to rest on opposing understandings, which are nevertheless deeply connected. On one hand, there is labour as alienation, as an ahistorical and reified category, as a category to be abolished, which nevertheless contains within it a kernel of human becoming. On the other hand, there is labour as a meaningful social subjectivation, which nevertheless is held by the firm grip of exploitation and alienation. Rather than a clear opposition, the concept finds its essence shifting in between alienation and becoming.

Marxian and Marxist scholarship have long dwelled upon this issue, even if it was a fairly marginal debate within the political development of Marxism until recently. On the one hand, there are currents that advocate an understanding of Marx's critique that implies the abolition of labour;<sup>29</sup> on the other hand there is a Marxism that defends the centrality of labour. Both sides have a sound claim to orthodoxy, to the extent that such claims actually matter in this discussion. Taking a step backwards from the conceptual discussion, one can see these shifts in Marx and in Marxism occurring through definite historical moments: the centrality of labour holds within the various ideological expressions of the workers' movement (not just Marxism, but also in anarchism) inasmuch as labour is upheld as a source of social meaning, cohesion, and progress. Such social meaning was certainly a bourgeois trope, to which various factions of the

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<sup>29</sup> Besides *operaismo*, numerous theoretical and political currents defend similar positions throughout the post-war period. The Situationist International and its inspired groups make up for a significant section of such currents, but their lineage also stems from the Dutch-German left and the Bordiga inspired ultra-left, both of which were brought back in 1968.

proletariat were oblivious,<sup>30</sup> but it did nevertheless provide the blueprint for the organized worker's movement.

The affirmation of political movements as legitimate and appealing rallying points occurs through shared experiences and common affects. The workers' movement had labour as this element of common experience and developed it into a workers' identity (often masked within the concept of class consciousness). This identity was based on the perception of the way labour thoroughly organized workers' lives. Marx's- and Marxism's-political project could not escape taking this into account, fostering a perception of labour as a dynamic and progressive social force. Upon the post-war demise of the labour movement, any serious critique of its defeat or compromises cannot but be directed at its grounding element. Unfettered by any immediate political concerns, critique is not bound by any pragmatic necessity, and rightfully aims at the radical revision of all givens. Even if an ontological concept of labour did ground the workers' movement, a balance sheet of its victories and defeats cannot overlook the problems of such naturalization. Neither can it avoid recognizing the social, political, and cultural power unearthed by the labour movement, as if to pretend that it is a sorrowful sidenote to the true meaning of Marx's critical method.

That such an impasse persists within the concept and political meaning of labour not only in Marxist scholarship but also within the political questioning of capitalism can and should be considered in itself. Marx's indecision, ambiguity, and hesitance aren't due neither to a theoretical insufficiency nor to the turbulence of a critical and philosophical thought process. Instead, they result from a complex question: how class itself problematized its role within the reproduction of capital. On the one hand, class entails a project of emancipation built upon an idea of civilizational progress, on an idea of fairness, recognition, and of moral elevation. On the other hand, class expresses a

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<sup>30</sup> As the Marxist discussion around labour complexified, so did the proletariat's history presupposed in it. Against the account which read the proletariat as the "progressive march of labour," as Eric Hobsbawm defined it, several others surfaced, from E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin. 1963) to Linebaugh and Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra* (Boston: Beacon Press. 2000), passing through the texts more closely connected to *operaismo* and *autonomia*, such as Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (NYC: Autonomedia). 2004) and the aforementioned Karl Heinz Roth's *L'Altro Movimento Operaio* (Rome: Feltrinelli. 1974).

blatant and remorseless refusal of labour. The conceptual indeterminacy of labour should be seen as a critical category, valid in itself, rather than a conceptual insufficiency. Labour is alienation, subjectivation, and the tension between them.

The issue of formal and real subsumption<sup>31</sup>, presented below, tentatively elaborates this impasse while confirming, even if only indirectly, the indeterminacy of Marx's concept of labour as an autonomous critical category. Only after the dialectic of labour as teleological force comes to a close, that is, only after the hypothesis of an emancipatory unfolding of the category of labour ceases to function, as it seemingly does in the problematic of subsumption, can a proper definition of labour emerge. That Marx can be read differently,<sup>32</sup> or that he explicitly says otherwise in other places is beside the point. Even if one can posit a category of antagonism exterior to capital, such a category is still bound to the problematization of labour as such.

Marx develops the question of formal and real subsumption in the unpublished sixth chapter of *Capital, Volume I*, titled the "Results of the Immediate Process of Production", purposefully left out by Marx on account of the discrepancy they introduced into the text's dialectical unfolding of categories. These concepts appear but once, exclusively in these drafts, even if the transformations within production they describe do play a central role in the Marxian corpus. Their pertinence, however, rests in their capacity to combine Marx's critical categories with the historical development of capitalist social relations beyond Marx's lifetime. Subsumption, and the many readings projected upon it, allows for a reading of Marx that is neither teleologic nor ahistorical, making Marxism an object for itself. The relative popularity of the concept in the 60s and 70s (which I will address in greater detail further on) sustained an interpretation of the ongoing transformations in capital and in the workers' movements—i.e., their mutual crisis in the early 70s—as connected issues: both were in fact crises in the systematic

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<sup>31</sup> The following explanation of the concept and problematization of real subsumption closely follows the following articles: "The History of Subsumption" in Endnotes 2. (London: 2010) and Clover, Joshua.

"Subsumption and Crisis" in O'Kane, Chris; Bonefeld, Werner; Best, Bervely (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*. (New York: Sage. 2018)

<sup>32</sup> See Lebowitz, M. *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*, (London: Palgrave McMillan. 2003).



centrality of labour for the social reproduction of capital. I will come back to these claims after discussing the terms in greater detail.

Within the tradition of German Idealism, the concept of subsumption itself has different outcomes and logical implications. The term refers to a dialectical operation where diverse intuitions are funneled into a single concept. Whereas for Kant subsumption refers to a process where truth is abstracted from the manifold into the categories of understanding, Hegel sees this process as fixing the wild and open diversity of the subsumed particulars to the abstract rigidity of universals. A proper relation between the particular and the universal, between intuitions and categories, would then consist in finding ever-unfolding concrete universals surpassing the crude operation of subsumption. But the concept perseveres in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* when it is later used to describe the relations of political domination happening between sovereign power and civil society, where the function of subsumption is assumed by the executive branches of government, both the judiciary and the police.

These multiple understandings surface both in Marx's usage of the term and in the various interpretations of such use. Marx uses the concept to describe the technical transformation within production and how this grounds a principle of general equivalence of labour, established throughout the historical formation of capital, and how such general equivalence is a relation of domination and exploitation.

Within *Capital*, volume I, Marx calls the attempts to increase profit through the expansion of the working day and the use of machines or labour management *absolute* and *relative* surplus-value. These aren't merely descriptive modalities of the capture of value, rather they address social processes: in order for the singular capitalist to increase gains he must extend working hours without extending pay. This extension is bound by several limits, the least of which isn't workers resistance. Such limits are curtailed by the attempts to make the labour process more productive, meaning, of making less hours produce more value, through machinery or through the systematization of the work process (including the processes of "sweating" labour, i.e., making it more intensive through coercion). The contrast between these options assumes different historical and social forms.

In the aforementioned unpublished manuscripts, Marx describes this historical and conceptual process through categories adjacent to absolute and relative surplus-value: formal and real subsumption.

Formal subsumption describes how productive techniques are captured within capital. Previously autonomous artisans now work for capitalists, using the same tools and methods as before. The division of labour, its social organization, and the managerial necessities remain essentially the same; the capitalist valorization of the labour does not fundamentally transform production: “The labour process becomes the instrument of the valorization process, the process of the self-valorization of capital—the manufacture of surplus-value. The labour process is subsumed under capital (it is its own process) and the capitalist intervenes in the process as its director, manager. For him it also represents the direct exploitation of the labour of others. It is this that I refer to as the *formal subsumption of labour under capital*.”<sup>33</sup>

Real subsumption, on the contrary, names how production in itself is transformed within the transition between absolute and relative surplus-value. Real subsumption fully alters labour’s characteristics: its division, compartmentalization, management, techniques, and objects. As the workshop grows into the factory, techniques are optimized and automatized, new managerial jobs appear. Capitalism becomes a force capable of determining not only production, but increasing aspects of the reproduction of private and social life.

Although there is a clear continuity between the paired categories of absolute/relative surplus-value and formal/real subsumption, they do address different aspects of the same process. Whereas the first explains how productivity becomes a structural feature of the development and expansion of capitalist social relations, the latter describes how this transition happens within the labour process; that is, how the abstraction of value makes the material reality of labours ever more abstract as well. As such, real subsumption accounts for the global and social expansion of capitalist social relations and the expansion of their brutal control over most spheres of life.

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<sup>33</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, 1019.

Hence, real subsumption comes to be a highly charged term in post-war Marxian discourse. On the one hand, the transition between real and formal subsumption is ripe for historicization purposes. It pinpoints the moment, or the moments<sup>34</sup>, in which capital fully came into its own, when it reached a sort of systematic and automatic maturity. On the other hand, such an historical movement is also understood as one of totalization. As capital becomes an overwhelming and omnipresent system of accumulation, so does alienation—in the sense drawn above—become second nature. As increases in productivity start to be sought within social life—and as class reproduction becomes hinged on the availability of cheap commodities—capitalism does become the immediate structure of mediation organizing existence. At the same time, subsumption is a process that always happens anew as new commodities and services are integrated into the organic composition of the temporal unity of production and circulation. And yet, despite the categorial significance of subsumption for the critique of political economy— i.e., its ability to account for the logico-historical genesis of abstract labour proper to capital while explaining why value comes to serve as the form that productive activity assumes within the capitalist mode of production— it never stops denoting an historical process. One can argue if and when a complete historical transition between formal and real subsumption ever took place, but it is substantially more difficult to dispute the historical hegemony of subsumption as method of attempting to increase value extraction.

Likewise, one can argue that real subsumption is too precise and technical term to sustain such an historical and conceptual weight, and that that the totalization of capital would warrant its own categories, but the concept does facilitate the articulation of the post-war critiques<sup>35</sup> that discuss both the integration of the workers' movement into the reproduction of capital and the cultural and social, some would say existential, dissolution and reorganization of processes of subjectivation.

If real subsumption means that every sphere of activity—hence every sphere of becoming—now contributes to the organization and sustainability of the apparatuses of extraction of surplus-value, then it also implies that the historical unfolding of different

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<sup>34</sup> See a thorough account of these historicization attempts in Endnotes' and Clover's aforementioned articles.

<sup>35</sup> These will be thoroughly described throughout the next chapters.

modes of producing has come to a close, or, at the very least, that it cannot progress within the institutional, political, and cultural framework that characterizes contemporary relations of production. Humanity not only faces a hostile material world; it has now become an expression of such a world. If subsumption is final, if all oscillation between the one and the manifold is stopped, then the categories of capital spin over themselves and their immanent contradictions do not lead to development, but rather to collapse. Labour becomes but an endless loop of mindless tasks, repeated onwards to death: time becomes but repetition.

Hence, real subsumption, even as a theory of existential alienation, is a theory of crisis. Such a crisis is presupposed in the economic dynamics of subsumption, as will become apparent in the next chapter, but also in the fact that real subsumption, as a realm of a total enforced equivalence, interrupts any possibility of a progressive, teleological, unfolding of labour as a category of social emancipation.

This apparent pessimism (of which the seemingly optimist radicalization of struggles in the 70s would be an example) is precisely what will distinguish the Marxian uses of the problematic of subsumption from the discourses indebted to either an Althusserian structural Marxism or a Lukacsian “humanist” Marxism. That Marxism itself was posited as an objective science, with corresponding institutions managing workers’ relations, served to illustrate just how far the process of alienation had come: that the science of the workers served as a science of the management of class struggle reveals something about capitalism that neither the structuralism nor the humanism of the hegemonic forms of Marxist orthodoxy could theorize or express.

But on the other hand, subsumption equally dismissed the possibility of the proletariat overcoming the domination of abstract institutions through the development of the productive forces. Subsumption did in fact imply a structural domination that left little space for the voicing of ethical/critical concerns, for in it capital had catastrophically won over any possibility of emancipatory becoming.

In between these, however, such apparent catastrophism also outlines a tentative theory of subjectivation: If subsumption does play out as the curtailment of experience and multiplicity within institutional, abstract, and structural institutions, then it also

outlines the process of subjectivation contained therein, i.e., how the possibility of becoming subject is connected to a collective action that works on itself. Hence, such subjectivation can also take place beyond such formal hypostatizations. That subsumption questions Marxism's emancipatory categories does not mean that it exhausts any possibility of ever overcoming capitalist social relations, it just means that such movement will happen through yet ungraspable and unnamable means.

If, as previously claimed, subsumption does indeed confront the Marxian corpus with the history of both capital and class after the emergence of a Marxist theory of capital, then its capacity to anticipate certain aspects of capital's development also opens the way for the conceptualization of concrete categories of struggle ungraspable in Marx's own time.

Within the discussion drawn thus far, what the problematic of real subsumption truly sustains is the instability and indeterminacy of the social and conceptual processes at work under the category of labour. Hence, no other Marxian problematic truly grasps the political question of labour as precisely as this term: real subsumption means that the problem behind labour isn't an inherent alienated nature waiting to be denounced, or an inherent emancipative nature waiting to be unleashed, but rather how the processes of subjectivation that occur within human activity are firmly hinged on their social, symbolic and material organization. Capital's unstoppable reach towards maximization of profit thoroughly short-circuits the very same forms of subjectivation it forces as norm. That capital expands the universality of wage labour at the same time as it attempts to curtail wages should also be read in terms of subjectivation: capital forever creating and undermining an ontology of labour.

This opens a field of antagonism, enmity and partiality—a political field—since what remains to be disputed isn't labour as a social object, as an abstract process, as a progressive force, but rather the social organization and symbolic expressions of labour as the power of control and command over subjectivation. Labour isn't inherently alienation or emancipation, but rather an expression of the historical contradiction between subjectivation and the forms of command which aim to determine such subjectivation.

This has represented a major problem for Marxism, since the large arc of Marx's thought seemingly posits at the same time a force and its impossibility—the development of capital is at the same time messianic and apocalyptic. It delivers both redemption and catastrophe. Rather than seeing this as a contradiction in Marx's thought and instead of attempting to either divorce these elements or choose one over the other, this impasse can be read as a category in itself that discloses a philosophical and political problem. Real subsumption affirms a historical suspension of the development of productive forces—an “eternal present” in Guy Debord's terms—but doing so, it demands a redefinition of labour that actually takes into account Marx's early outline of the concept.

If the systematic logic of Marx's critique of political economy only holds if it is separated from a humanist teleology, then his concept of labour can only be understood if seen through an antagonism inherent to the development of capital that posits alienated labour on one side and, on the other, the forms of subjectivation that seek to extract themselves from capital's own subject-object relation. If the historical conditions of labour always come as reified, then humanity's *species-being* vis-à-vis nature is not set against the realm of necessity but against the realm of reification. Not as “conscience,” but as technique of subjectification vis-à-vis the reification of social relations. Here we shift from the distinction between alienated and non-alienated labour to the distinction between labour and the refusal of labour, inasmuch as such refusal can be understood as an open problematic and not as a concrete and closed array of activities.

*Operaismo's* singularity vis-à-vis the post-War Marxian currents'<sup>36</sup> refusal of labour lies in its approach to this problematic as political problem rather than as an exegetical question. If the category of labour is truly ridden with antinomies, not just conceptually within Marx's corpus, but within the very experience and logical structure of capital, then *operaismo* must be understood as a current that emerged by conceptually grasping the problem of labor in capital's concrete-historical manifestations. The refusal of labour as

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<sup>36</sup> The French and German groups and tendencies like the Situationist International, *Theorie Communiste*, *Information et Correspondance Ouvrière*, *Neue Marx Lektüre*, *Kapitallogik*, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, etc. See “Communization and Value-Form theory” in Endnotes #2 for a short introduction to German value-form theory and Bourselleir, Christophe. *Histoire Générale de L'Ultra-Gauche*. (Paris: Donoel 2003) for an account of the French post 68 ultra-left.

such is neither (only) the eulogy of play, excess, or leisure, nor the correction of a logical inconsistency in the workers' movement, nor even the kernel of a "true" revolutionary gesture. Rather it is a social form whose determinations and expressions are manifold, emerging within concrete political struggles. The task undertaken by early *operaismo* was to grasp such manifestations as a coherent conceptual and political problematic.

## II. *Neocapitalismo* and antagonism

Raniero Panzieri was one of the founders of *Quaderni Rossi*, the journal where *operaismo* coalesced as a theoretical current. His accounts of the relations between the explosion of struggles in the industrial north of Italy and the post-war transformations in capital lay the steppingstones for *operaismo*, as the institutional workers' movement abandoned factory struggles to focus on the narratives of popular resistance built during the war.

Panzieri's concept of neo-capitalism maintained that as capital becomes a force capable of subsuming more and more aspects of social life, it transforms into a political apparatus concerned with the management and expansion of its structure. Such is its novelty regarding its previous forms. This is one of *operaismo*'s core ideas: transition from formal to real subsumption forces the economic power of capital to become political, to embrace social management and political control of workers' antagonism. Class struggle becomes a zero-sum game where the social relations that appear as policies of wealth management are but elements within a civil war.

*Operaismo* emerges precisely against any understanding of "development" as a category of emancipatory potential. Neo-capitalism was a "highly dynamic social and historical system"<sup>37</sup> where "capitalism and development are one and the same thing: capitalism lives by promoting a continuous expansion of economic potentialities, giving unprecedented impulse to science, technics and their application in the economic field."<sup>38</sup> Development, a seemingly neutral process where wealth functions socially,

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<sup>37</sup> Raniero, Panzieri. "Relazioni sul Neocapitalismo" (1961) in *Panzieri, Raniero. La Ripresa del Marxismo Leninismo in Italia* (Rome: Nueve Edizione Operaie, 1977), 170.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 170. Kautsky would affirm the same: It is not the socialist who destroy this "freedom of labor," but the restless progress of large production.

coincides with capital when productivity becomes a consequence of individual capitals trying to curtail profit differences. Competition ensures that profit is determined by technical innovation, which is “central to the entire process of reproduction and circulation of capital.” As wage struggles exert pressure on such profits, capital responds by replacing variable capital with fixed capital. Jobs and workplaces become automated: “It’s in the introduction of new machines that capitalists sustain their struggle to defend profit against the waged pressure to reduce the rate of surplus value.”<sup>39</sup>

Panzieri’s view that social and economic development was the progression of capitalist social relations shattered the Marxist trope that the development of productive forces would coincide with the development of capital itself and lead to a socialist social majority, as Kautsky and Engels claimed. The political aspects of technological innovation go beyond Marx’s intuition concerning the critical relation between technological development and profit, where the former would suppress the latter and hence lead to crisis<sup>40</sup>. While tendentially correct, such analysis fails to recognize the inherently political character of technology itself, i.e., its capacity to thoroughly subsume the relation between worker and production, between subject and object, within forms that presuppose the extraction of surplus-value. Panzieri’s “On the Capitalist Use of Machines in neo-capitalism”<sup>41</sup> argues that there is no “true” development opposed to capitalist development, meaning that there can be no “socialist” development: “the capitalist use of machines is not the simple distortion or deviation of an ‘objective’ and rational development,” because within it “the process of industrialization that, step by step, commands ever more advanced stages of technological progress, coincides with the unceasing increase of capitalist authority.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>40</sup> Marx’s theory of crisis says that the competition pushes the development of fixed capital (here understood as technology) in proportion to variable capital. The relative reduction of variable capital reduces costs but also reduces profits.

<sup>41</sup> First published in *Quaderni Rossi*. Raniero, Panzieri. “Sull’Uso Capitalistico delle Macchine nel Neocapitalismo” (1961a) in Panzieri, Raniero. *La Ripresa del Marxismo Leninismo in Italia* (Rome: Nuove Edizione Operaie, 1977).

<sup>42</sup> Panzieri (1961a), 151.



Development, as such, mainly stands for an increase in productivity that is both economic and social, an expansion of capitalist social relations that enlarges the fluxes of capital, even to the benefit of most or some of the workers. Importantly, the inclusion of workers within capital did not necessarily imply their impoverishment nor their progression towards a social or political majority. Panzieri saw this explicitly when he claimed that the development of profit as an articulation between fixed and variable capital, that is, between the means of production and living labour, fostered the material development of labour i.e., the improvement of workers' conditions of survival. Panzieri, describing how the subject is dealt in *Capital, Volume I*, says:

[T]he proportional size of the industrial reserve army grows with the increase in wealth. But [Marx] adds: All methods of multiplication of the labour-force further mutilate the worker. They make him a fragment of man; they reduce him to a meaningless fragment of a machine; they destroy the content of labour itself through the agony of labour. Whatever the wage rate, workers' condition worsens, it worsens evidently not materially and not from an economical point of view.<sup>43</sup>

This leads to a political paradox in which the improvement in labour's material conditions is also an augmentation "of the social abyss that separates [labour] from the capitalist."<sup>44</sup> The threshold of neo-capitalism, then, is when the development of productive forces has reached a point where the organization of the reproductive cycle of labour ensures, at the same time, a sustainable degree of wealth and an increasingly unsustainable degree of antagonism and alienation. The improvement of workers' lives-development—is the expansion of capital's domination over them:

[Against Marx] Engels formulated this ridiculous representation of an objective process in which, slowly, the rich become always fewer and richer and the poor always poorer and more numerous, until the qualitative unsustainability of this relation would provoke the inversion of the situation. This interpretation couldn't be further displaced from Marxism. For Marx, both categories, capital and waged labour, are bound together and to abolish one means to

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<sup>43</sup> Panzieri (1961), 173.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

abolish the other. There is no quantitative change in waged labour<sup>45</sup> that suppresses capital, on the contrary, they are on a reciprocal vital relation in between themselves.<sup>46</sup>

Panzieri tentatively grasps what would become evident in the following decades, when the institutional Italian left pushed for a social majority before completely collapsing: unlike the PCI's Marxism claimed, the widespread dissemination of capitalist relations of production—a social majority of wage earners—did not lead to the necessary supersession of capital. This widespread socialization of the factory forms of control was always already the result of forms of submission and political command radiating from elsewhere.<sup>47</sup> The argument does not consist in the alienated naturalization of exploitation and in the rupture of *species-being*, but rather in the immediately political aspect of such social relations, in the strengthening and expansion of the authoritarian element present in every wage relation that then finds its systematization in state power.

What seemed like a theoretical problem in Marx's work—that of simultaneously positing labour as a dialectical and as an antagonistic category—emerged as a social contradiction, where the hegemonic expansion of waged labour had not led to any sort of political emancipation, but to the ever-greater participation of workers' institutions in the management of capitalist social relations. Likewise, the civilizing promise of labour that one finds in Kautsky and throughout most of the workers' movement here reveals itself to be bankrupt. The moral elevation of labour was but the increasing submission to domination. The dissolution of *ancien régime* social mores found in the new industrial urban centres—the promise of the city as site of freedom and play—gave way to a planned metropolitan sprawl looming from the factory gates onwards to nothing. What became evident in the expansion of productive forces was not proletarian solidarity and sociality but ever-increasing forms of domination and separation.

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<sup>45</sup> Wage struggles were seen as qualitative and not quantitative, since their aims were interpreted as more political than economical.

<sup>46</sup> Panzieri (1961), 175.

<sup>47</sup> Panzieri drafts a trope that will become common within *autonomia* in the following decade: law—even labour law, or “feminist” laws such as those concerning divorce and abortion—is the institutional apparatus that supports the expansion of capitalist domain, and movement, here formulated as democratic and autonomous wage struggles, is a form of political action that takes place beyond and against the realm of law. See V.A.. *Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti*. (Milan: Rosenberg & Sellier, [1977] 1987).

Panzieri's analysis is fairly contained when compared to the accounts of the totalization of capital that would appear in the following years. Its relevance, however, rests on the fact that it did not appear within the militant or theoretical fringes of the workers' movement, but within a tradition firmly entrenched in its institutions. This meant that *neocapitalismo*, as a problematic, was not only a critical assessment, but was quite openly the attempt to determine a new programmatic basis.

Tronti's *Operai e Capitale* articles expand Panzieri's analysis of the socialization of capital and the ensuing political consequences. Tronti reads Panzieri's account of neo-capitalism first and foremost as a category of class antagonism, drawing the connection between Marx's valorization process and the expansion of capital's social relations. In reading the third chapter of *Capital, Volume I*, "Money or the circulation of commodities," Marx, Tronti distinguishes between the "two points of view from which to consider the capitalist form of the production of commodities: the labor process and the valorization process."<sup>48</sup>

Labour consumes the means of production through production, but the process is inverted in valorization: within it "capital consumes labour." It is only in valorization, in the creation of surplus-labour, that capital "succeeds in seizing, in its own way, the unity of the processes of labor and valorization."<sup>49</sup> Valorization subsumes labour's consumption of the means of production and its transformation into capital, creating a unity in between both moments. In other words, the social reproduction of labour is increasingly engulfed in the process of extraction of surplus value, and the degree of this unity is the degree of development of capital: "the more capital is capable of [seeing work-force only as capital], the more it is capable of recuperating the entire social labor process within the process of the valorization of capital, the more it succeeds in integrating the work-force into capital."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tronti, Mario. "La Fabbrica e la Società" (1962) in Tronti, Mario. *Operai e Capitale* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2006 [1966]), 35.

<sup>49</sup> Tronti (1962), 35.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 36.

This means that the mere existence of a capitalist *society* is already a mode of existence of capital, meaning that capital is now social capital: “Capital’s socialization process is the material basis, at a certain level, on which the process of the development of capital is grounded. The determinate formation of a capitalist society presupposes that the production of social capital is already realized as a historical act and already accepted as natural fact.”<sup>51</sup>

If the relations of production are inherently based on diverging class interests, then development functions as the integration and systematization of class antagonism. As such: “Capital’s ‘plan’ springs forth, above all, from the need to make the working-class function as such inside social capital. The growing socialization of the capitalist relations of production does not bring with itself a socialist society, it brings only a growing workers’ power within the capitalist system.”<sup>52</sup> The integration of the workers’ movement within capital means the integration of measures of planification within capital—a capitalist socialism.

The socialism of capital is an openly provocative expression, but Tronti’s argument goes beyond mere spite. This “socialism” comes about through the movement of capital, when its transition through different stages and different forms of development finds a weak spot in individual capital. “When social capital undergoes a value revolution, individual capital is always in danger of succumbing if it fails to adapt to the conditions of this change.”<sup>53</sup> Individual capital—where profits are split between individual consumption, the reproduction of constant capital, and the reproduction of variable capital—is vulnerable to the social, political and economic shifts that can, quite easily and unexpectedly, alter the market, the availability of certain commodities, the dynamics of circulation, and lastly, the conditions of employment for variable capital. Consequently, “We find here the necessity of finding a nexus between the cycle of individual capitals, understood as partial movements of the process of the reproduction of the total social capital.”<sup>54</sup> That nexus is profit.

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<sup>51</sup> Tronti, Mario. “Il Piano del Capitale” (1963) in Tronti, Mario. *Operai e Capitale* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2006 [1966]), 58.

<sup>52</sup> Tronti (1963), 58.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

Profit emerges as a social and economic category distinct from mere surplus value, precisely because profit is a socialization of surplus value, a social systematization of surplus-values carried out by individual capitals organizing as a social force. Once profit emerges as mediation, the driving force organizing the division of the working day stops being an immediate consideration of the magnitude of surplus value, but, rather, how each part of the working day participates in the social reproduction of variable and constant capital: “The working day, which in the production of individual capital emerged as split between necessary and surplus labor (...) emerges now, in the production of social capital, truly split between constant and variable capital, between the production-reproduction of one and the production-reproduction of the other. (...) The working day now functions, in its entirety, inside the process of the production of social capital.”<sup>55</sup> The reproduction of the labor-force is equal to the mere reproduction of variable capital. The division between necessary and surplus labor does not disappear at this level: “it is simply generalized, socialized in the total process of capitalist production. There is a social surplus value that is extorted from the class and that ends up socializing the entire existence of surplus value. Social surplus value is nothing more than the profit of social capital.”<sup>56</sup> Social capital transforms, or rather, constitutes new social forms: “The social character of production has extended to such point that society functions now as a moment of production (...) social capital is not the simple sum of individual capitals. (...) it is capital that discovers itself, at a certain level of development, as a social power.”<sup>57</sup>

Neo-capitalism, in this account, shuffles the categories of alienation we saw above. The objectification of an essential metabolic relation between subject and nature in a number of abstract institutions impedes the unfolding of species-being, the ontological processes of becoming “human.” Capital’s planification, its totalization of the sphere of reproduction, subsumes all possible dialectical stages that mediate between the individual and the collective, which become mere moments in the process of valorization. If the legitimacy of an emancipatory category of labour rested on the possibility that some social relations fell outside the determinations of capital, *operaismo* claims that

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 65.

this *new* capitalism does away with this possibility such that no possible development of “consciousness” survives, as capital has become a social force that logically predates the phenomenon of consciousness itself.

In other words, Marx sees consciousness evolving through stages that host ever new relations between collective and individual consciousness mediated by material relations of production, but neo-capitalism entails that this process has exhausted itself at the moment when labour became nothing more than the socially organized production of profit, which enmeshes all conscious and unconscious processes in capitalist social relations. Only within an ontology of capital can labour then appear.

However, this does not mean that antagonism is removed from the equation. This is *operaismo*’s singularity. The intensity of class struggle actually increases once its mediations collapse. Within *neocapitalismo*, the refusal of labour indeed becomes a social form, transversal to the class, even if it appears in contradictory forms outside the workers’ movement or even the left. As Tronti claims:

Workers’ insubordination can progress through the same path as capitalist exploitation (...). It is clear, for example, that one must today recognize and valorize all the positive content that is hidden and mystified within the several processes of so-called alienation. If this corrupted word still maintains some sense, it is just that of expressing a specifically determined form of direct exploitation of labor by capital. Total estrangement of labour to the laborer; the useful, concrete labour that becomes objectively external, strange, indifferent to the industrial worker. The end of the craft, of the profession, of this last semblance of worker’s personal independence (...). The positive content of alienation, then, is not only the positive content of capitalist exploitation, taken as the moment where the antagonistic response of the workers becomes conscious and organizes. The process of the total estrangement of labour coincides with its complete objectification within the process of the production of capital. It is only when labour is completely objectified within capitalist production that the existence of the working class becomes specifically contradictory to the entire system of capital. Not only the product of labour, not only the instruments of production, but all conditions of labour must become objective within the person of capital, all must be torn from the subjectivity of the single worker, if they are to be taken back as inimical to the collective worker. The single worker must become indifferent to his own

labour so that the working class can come to hate it. Within the class, only the alienated worker is truly revolutionary<sup>58</sup>

Marx's historical unfolding of an ever more abstract category of labour in the *Grundrisse*, seen above, is here inverted. The emergence of such a category does not entail the possibility of its socialist *aufhebung*, but rather the possibility of its hostile refusal. *Operaismo* affirms neither a positive content of labour nor a purely negative content of alienation. Revisiting the terms drawn before, the political content of communism rests not on the development of the forces of production, but, on the contrary, on the refusal of the exploitation, domination, and alienation that materializes once such development reveals itself for what it truly is. *Operaismo* posits the refusal of labour as a political and critical category that stands against the totalization and the normativity of labour.

This gesture shuffles Marx's categories even further. On the one hand, the socialization of capital is powerful enough to void the political content of economic planning in the historical workers' movement. On the other hand, this expansion of capitalist social relations also expands antagonism, making it explicit therein.

In order to proceed and to balance neo-capitalism and workers' antagonism, a conceptual split is made within the concept of class itself. Tronti's account of antagonism classifies two instances of labour: class and labour-force. When antagonism expresses itself through the political action of the labour-force and its institutions, it is but the impulse that drives the modernization of capital. In this sense, the capacity of capital to develop, to expand, to modernize, depends on labour's political agency. It is only when a labour-force manages to organize around their particular, individual, partial interests that it becomes class:

Capitalists know this perfectly well: the real generalization of the workers' condition can assert the image of its formal extinction. It is here that the power specific to workers is immediately absorbed into the generic concept of popular sovereignty: the political mediation serves here to make the explosive content of the productive forces function peacefully within the beautiful forms of the modern capitalist relations of production. When

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<sup>58</sup> Tronti (1963), 78.

the working class politically refuses to become “the people,” the path towards revolution does not close, it opens<sup>59</sup>

Hence, class only occurs when workers are set against their identity as labour-force, against labour. In other words, the expansion of capitalist social relations occurs through the expansion of antagonistic workers’ behaviors, Tronti’s famous claim of a “class primacy” that would become the affirmation most readily associated with *operaismo*. On the one hand, we find a class identity that is subsumed into a collective, productive, and political identity that is configured as a universal social abstraction. On the other hand, we find that identity’s constitutive fragmentation emerging as a partisan force *within and against* capital.

Tronti’s class partiality vis-à-vis the universality of the labor-force rests on the aforementioned problem of the socialization of capital. Society—the forced and normative union of disparate social elements under a common structural identity—is but an expression of capital’s absorption of labour. Although Tronti does not use such terminology, the socialization of capital encloses class within a cybernetic form of government<sup>60</sup>—a networked synthesis—where the antagonist forms of appearance of capital are neutralized and subsumed into a collective identity such as the “people,” or “Italians” for instance. Workers’ partiality—their class—is the search for an exteriority to this synthesis not through its weakest point, but through its strongest singularity.

*Operaismo*’s heretical overtones vis-à-vis Marxist orthodoxy would find their confirmation within actual workers’ struggles and within the research the *operaisti* carried out within their midst. The conceptualization of a *new capitalism* opened the possibility of thinking and understanding new struggles, whose novelty contrasted with the Italian institutional left, though perhaps not Marx *per se*. In fact, inasmuch as the conceptual framework of *neo-capitalismo* is already latent in Marx, so are the forms of struggle that Tronti will name “the refusal of labour.”

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>60</sup> See Tiqqun, *Cybernetic Hypothesis*. (Cambridge: MIT press. 2020).



Tronti grounds the concrete forms of this refusal within the factories featured in the Italian “economic miracle.” Only the factory could “block the functioning of society itself—and the way is then open to overthrow and destroy the power of capital.<sup>61</sup>” Only the factory concentrated a large enough number of individuals within a setting that was openly hostile to them, and only the factory organized their life in such a way that the experience of this hostility and antagonism became obvious to all.

*Operaismo* drew its problematic of the refusal of labour from the inquiries conducted within the industrial metropolitan landscape, which were then published in *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*. These investigations are what generated the category of the refusal of labour as the “positive content of alienation.” Romano Alquati, one of the early contributors to *Quaderni Rossi*, brought the research methods he had used in the rural South to the industrial North, where he first used them as a member of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI).<sup>62</sup> In an intervention in a 1961 PSI meeting on the ongoing FIAT struggles, Italy’s biggest car manufacturer, Alquati characterized the despair of young and unskilled workers:

Those who don’t study, who are resigned to their factory rank, have, inside and outside of the factory, a life that is completely “passive” and “absurd.” At work, they don’t care about anything, they’re always making something up in order to make “the evening come by faster;” they kill time and that’s it. They belong to families that are relatively well-off: the father works, the mother works, so the son keeps all the money to himself, to spend it around. He has a small car or motorcycle. In the evenings, if he is able to fight off tiredness, he leaves to spend his pay in amusements that never completely satisfy him, or that make him hate his condition as an industrial worker even more.<sup>63</sup>

Alquati claims this worker was politicized precisely through his capacity to build a “political bridge” between the “exploitation he suffers at FIAT” and his “social life outside

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<sup>61</sup> Tronti (1963), 592.

<sup>62</sup> The Italian Socialist Party had formed during the resistance. Firmly on the left, it assumed increasing relevance after the 1956 soviet intervention in Hungary, which provoked substantial splits in the Italian left that had the PCI as reference.

<sup>63</sup> Alquati, Romano, “Relazione sulle ‘Forze Nuove’” (1961) in Alquati, Romano. *Sulla Fiat* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), 38.

of the factory walls.”<sup>64</sup> The existential despair felt outside the factory was an extension of the political and productive relations experienced within the factory.

The capacity to think this “political bridge” was an element of profound transformation in the conceptual elaboration of forms of class consciousness and political action: “the young technician raises an issue that isn’t answerable with nationalizations nor with expropriations. Furthermore, the impossibility emerges of distinguishing, even for just one moment, not only between demands and politics, but also between the political demands and the moment of organization.”<sup>65</sup> This points to not only the impossibility separating and distinguishing the experience of class and of political action, but also, the impossibility of seeing any social worth in the toil and drudgery of labour.

The intuition regarding a political bridge made it work both ways. Profit’s logic—driving the socialization of capital and the transformation of the work-place—wasn’t perceived as economic, but rather, as political. This is a crucial point. The rejection of hierarchy came, first and foremost, from how the factory made evident the despotic aspect of hierarchical organization, rather than its technical or economical ones:

In reality, these hierarchical levels do not have any correspondence to the responsibility nor to the technical content of the job. Every system of hierarchization has a political function inside or outside the factory. (...) What renders [hierarchization] politically relevant is not the classical fact of dividing the workers, nor the most recent one, of fighting class consciousness by integrating workers at varied levels. To these we can add a recent political objective: to naturalize the acceptance of hierarchies inside and outside the factory, so as to fight the always clearer demand for self-management that technological progress promotes in workers.<sup>66</sup>

Capital’s management of production fosters organizational aspects whose functions are exclusively political. It assumes forms whose primary concern is not the creation of surplus-value, but rather the constitution of social forms capable of determining the

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<sup>64</sup> Alquati (1961), 39.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>66</sup> Alquati (1961), 51.

spheres that lay beyond the factory walls but within the productive process. Alquati points to the workers' intuition that this hierarchization does not follow a direct logic of accumulation. Hierarchization rather concerns the prevention of struggles.

Fragmentation between workers, between workers and their product, is a political, and not an economical, operation. On the shopfloor, the multiplication of functions of organization, control and planning sees these functions progressively integrated within every worker:

this means that capital has its generals and its sergeants, a crowd of individuals that work but do not add any value to the commodity. They watch and are used only to assure that power remains in the firm hands of the group who controls this complex mechanism (...) Hence, there is no difference between the security guard at Olivetti and the *Carabinieri*.<sup>67</sup>

Alquati's research unearths a conception of profit that functions as a charismatic social form that radiates from the factory to the surrounding territories through the qualitative modulation of the working process. Even though Alquati used Lukacs' concept of reification, the normative process at play did not take place through commodity fetishism, nor through the "spectacle," but through the despotic territorialisation of factory relations.

### III. "The party of anarchy"

Raniero Panzieri also saw two unprecedented features emerging in the reemergence of factory struggles. First, "due to the new character of factory work, workers' partial reconquest of consciousness regarding their labour is no longer possible. The limited defense of the preservation of professional qualifications, as something that the worker has for himself as his personal attribute, is no longer possible."<sup>68</sup> The fragmentation of the production cycle and the consequent separation between worker and the wholeness of the produced commodity curtailed the reach of struggles whose aim was to defend specialized labour.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>68</sup> Panzieri (1961), 127.

Second, Panzieri claimed that “we are watching a process of unitary recomposition of the working class at a higher level, one that sets the class in front of the complexity of the capitalist mechanism.”<sup>69</sup> Even if capital’s triumphant reorganization disrupted previous demand repertoires, this fragmentation of production made struggles themselves the site of the reorganization of a shared perception of class belonging, something that *operaismo* would come to call “class recomposition.” As such, workers’ themselves—not unions nor parties—were developing new forms and new methods of struggle.

Rather than merely address working conditions these struggles challenged the apparatuses of labour as such, and, in doing so, built forms of organization hostile to both the factory and unions. When Panzieri affirmed the political nature of the new struggles—that their form and their content now coincided, that struggles were in themselves a prefiguration of socialism—he was grasping towards an understanding of the increasing coincidence between the different phases and modes of struggle: the moment of conceptualization became the moment of organization, the moment of organization became the moment of socialization, and so on: as Marx said, communism is its becoming. As the refusal of labour became a form of struggle—through wildcat strikes, absenteeism, and increasingly radical and violent confrontations with factories managers and bouncers—it also opened the space for it to become a form of life, and eventually, one that prefigured communism—not in the sense of anticipating communism, but in that of embodying the historical process of its becoming.

Alquati addresses the same intuition, reformulating the terms: demands, organization, and antagonism become one and the same thing, in exactly the same way. How so? Demands push tactical movements preoccupied with the affirmation of a type of organization which does not see nor consider anything but its own power within the relation of antagonism to the boss. In a series of *Quaderni Rossi* articles on the Olivetti<sup>70</sup> workers’ struggles, Alquati notes:

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Olivetti is an Italian manufacturer of typewriters, computers and tablets who produced the world’s first programable desktop computer in 1964.

the political progression of the struggle, its politicization, has become normal. The acquisition and extension of a class consciousness is the largest, and most persistent, conquest these young men have made. Overcoming the passivity of previous generations of workers, who had participated in the post-war workers' parties, [these young workers]'s struggles start from economic demands, but they always hold hard and have as a political goal "to look their boss directly in the eye."<sup>71</sup>

As Panzieri had stated before, workers had acknowledged the fact that material improvements and disposable income did not mean political power. Struggles showed the contradictions of the factory system but also that the "qualitative improvements offered by the system are not 'human' but reified and alienating."<sup>72</sup> Factories were nothing more than "a system of exploitation, based on the objectivism of calculus and on the techniques of rationalization, always already fetishized in new value."<sup>73</sup> This was so "because development makes the system merge with the rationalization that seeks to command and characterize every twist and turn of social life, where every relation is shaped by the company's modules, where that same rationalization participates in the same charismatic power of the symbol of dominion that is still its truest soul: profit."<sup>74</sup>

Tronti would more clearly classify these struggles and these behaviors as the refusal of labour, as he shows how the historical transformations within capital relate to an inherent antagonism that can only truly express itself within the gesture of refusal. If Alquati and Panzieri aptly identified the socio-political features of the emerging wave of struggles, Tronti grasped the political potential behind them:

Are the workers doing anything else when they struggle against the boss? Are they not above all fighting against labour? Are they not first and foremost saying 'no' to the transformation of labour-power into labour? Are they not, more than anything, refusing to receive labour from the capitalist? Stopping labour does not in fact mark a refusal to give capital the use of one's labour-power, since it has already been given to capital through the legal contract stipulating the sale and purchase of this particular commodity. Nor is it a refusal to hand

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<sup>71</sup> Alquati, Romano, "Composizione Organica del Capital e Forza-lavoro alla Ollivetti" (1961) in Alquati, Romano. *Sulla Fiat* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), 86.

<sup>72</sup> Alquati (1961), 87.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

over to capital the products of labour, since this is legally already capital's property, and the worker does not in any case know what to do with this property. Rather, stopping labour—the strike, as the classic form of working-class struggle—is a refusal of capital's command, its role as the organizer of production.<sup>75</sup>

Capital enforces the political cohesion of workers within the categories of people, citizenship and “humanity” at the same time as it shatters the dialectical and social process of production that grounded subjectivation within social labour. *Operaismo*'s account shows how workers' resistance forces capital to shatter its own social bases, its own social metaphysics:

At this point, the working class must consciously organize as an irrational element within the specific rationality of capitalist production. The growing rationalization of modern capitalism must find an insurmountable limit in the growing irrationality of the organized workers, in the workers' refusal of political integration within the economic development of the system. The working class becomes the only anarchy that capitalism is not capable of organizing socially. The task of the workers' movement is to scientifically and politically organize this anarchy of the workers inside political production. Within the model of society organized by capital, the workers' party cannot but be the organization of anarchy, not inside, but outside of capital, outside its development.<sup>76</sup>

Class as the party of anarchy. A formulation set to anger all factions of the workers' movement, whose apparent paradox and ambiguity fully encapsulates the arguments to come. If the refusal of labour truly expresses itself not as anarchy, but as the *party of* anarchy, as the organized tactical effort to disrupt and derail the reproduction of capital, then the refusal of labour is indeed a social form capable of assuming determinate forms and concrete mediations.

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<sup>75</sup> Tronti, Mario. “Prime Tesi” (1967), in *Operai e Capitale* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2006 [1966]), 238.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

## Chapter II: Nevermind the dialectics, *here's the autonomia operaia*

The metropolitan proletariat, from Berlin to Brixton, from Naples to Zurich, from Amsterdam to Warsaw, grasps reality and becomes revolutionary according to means not given by memory. What interests me is the absence of memory. How can a revolutionary wisdom and a theory of knowledge of this territory exist – *and they do exist and are functional* – outside of the movement's historical memory, independent of its continuity, of its caesuras, and its problems? (...) the class composition of the contemporary metropolitan subject has no memory because it has no labour, because it loathes commanded labour, dialectical labour. It has no memory because only through labour can the proletariat build a relation with past history. It has no dialectics because only memory and labour constitute a dialectics. But non-labour is still a subject: everyone sees it. Deprived of memory and dialectics. But still a subject: everyone fears it. (...) The absence of memory is a revolutionary potentiality for the metropolitan proletariat.

Antonio Negri. "Erkenntnistheorie: elogio dell'assenza di memória"<sup>1</sup>

The previous chapter described how *operaismo* discovered a positive content in the alienation of labour, how it made the shifting status of the concept of labour in Marx's critique of political economy stand as an autonomous critical category, capable of grasping the content of its contemporary struggles and of establishing a framework in which they could understand themselves.

As the 1968 wildcat strikes and occupations exploded throughout Italy's factories, universities and city squares, *operaismo* was seemingly vindicated by the materialization of a myriad of parties, committees, and collectives whose antagonism to the PCI and its unions was expressed in the *Quaderni Rossi* thesis of a class autonomy vis-à-vis capital. The *operai's* hitherto latent and subterranean strategy of refusal had materialized concrete institutions.

As we've seen, the *operaismo* of the *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia*, through the inquiries into workers' lives, hinted at the possibility of a different Marx. Even if

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<sup>1</sup> Negri, Toni "Erkenntnistheorie: elogio dell'assenza di memória," in *Metropoli* #5, June 1981.

Panzieri laid the ground for such a heterodoxy, it was Tronti who kickstarted the effort to read it against the PCI's Kaustkian and Gramscian frameworks.<sup>2</sup> Marx against Marxism. This allowed the refusal of labour to be understood as a social form and as a critical category.

Tronti's own view on the political unfolding of the refusal of labour was deeply rooted in Leninist forms, namely, the vanguard party. *Operaismo's* first split occurs precisely over this question. Against Panzieri, who argued that the PCI and the PSI should come to terms with the new realities of class struggle, Tronti defended the imperative need for a new party. Once this imperative revealed itself to be unrealistic, and once 1968 inaugurated not the new party, but tens of irreconcilable candidates for such a role, Tronti famously returned to the PCI.<sup>3</sup> The wildcat and autonomous struggles would continue, however, ever more widespread and conscious of their political, critical and social specificity vis-à-vis the institutional workers movement.

In some ways, Negri's work throughout the seventies attempted to repeat the gesture of Tronti's *Operai e Capitale*: to read the new repertoire of struggles through Marx, against Marxism, in order to develop a critical apparatus that would promote self-consciousness amongst the struggles that materialized the social form of refusal and thereby aid in building new institutions for the workers' movement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A Gramsci thoroughly revised by Togliatti. For a thorough discussion of Gramsci's role in *operaismo* and *autonomia* see Tronti, Mario, "Some questions around Gramsci's Marxism" (1958) in [viewpointmag.com/2016/10/03/some-questions-around-gramscis-marxism-1958/](http://viewpointmag.com/2016/10/03/some-questions-around-gramscis-marxism-1958/). See also Paolo Capuzzo and Sandro Mezzadra, "Provincializing the Italian reading of Gramsci," in *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, eds. N. F. R. Srivastava and B. Bhattacharya (New York: Routledge, 2012), 34-54.

<sup>3</sup> Tronti's return to the PCI has always been a contentious point within the legacy of *operaismo*. On the one hand, it is thoroughly in line with his defense of class centrality, especially when this gesture is read through Tronti's refusal of the new subjective categories that Negri came up with over the years. On the other hand, it is unclear how Tronti could assume representative functions in the senate while at the same time claiming that democracy, not fascism, had destroyed the labour movement.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, Negri himself assumes this, in Hegelian terms, in the 1997 introduction to the English translation of his *autonomia* pamphlets: "this discussion allowed the movement to deepen its consciousness of itself." Negri, Toni *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*, trans. Arianna Bove, Ed Emery, Timothy S. Murphy, and Francesca Novello, ed. Timothy S. Murphy (New York: Verso Books, 1997), XXXIX.



In this chapter I will demonstrate how Negri turns Tronti's "Copernican turn"-the claim of class primacy that encapsulates Tronti's 60s perspective-into a method that reads every category of the critique of political economy as a category of antagonism. Labour, first and foremost, but also commodities, wages, money, and value are all expressions of a fundamental antagonism between class and capital. Within the post-war transformations in capital, the latent antagonism explodes into new forms of struggle as a self-conscious refusal of labour, which tendentially coalesces into new collective subjectivities. In this, Negri argues the working class valorises itself by constituting new forms of using goods-new use-values that are autonomous from exchange value-thereby collapsing capital's law of value, the grounding of value on abstract labour. Negri rightly unearths a conceptual dimension for the antagonism bursting through the seams of the labour movement's political institutions, but his effort also seeks to affirm a concrete political direction within the burgeoning movement of *autonomia*. "Self-valorization" is one of the first expressions of a concept which will know numerous forms all throughout Negri's work. However, it reconstructs, within *autonomia*, the same vulgar dialectics of production that Negri sets out to refuse in the first place. Against Negri and against this conceptual framework, I argue that real subsumption entails a *suspension* of dialectical subjectivation rather than its programmatic refusal; and it is within this suspension that one can grasp both an element of exteriority to capital and the political kernel of *autonomia*.

## I. Self-valorization

This section will present Negri's 70s take on Marx's critique of value, on which he will ground his understanding of the autonomous social movements which unfold throughout the decade. Negri's reading of Marx isn't merely exegetical. Rather, Marx's categories double as interpretative frameworks and as guidelines for the direction of struggles. I will describe Negri's view of the relationship between value and antagonism, as well as the historical dynamic in which Negri situates it. The real subsumption of labour under capital, an increasingly determining tendency throughout the history of capital, now spells out the end of Marx's law of value, which in turn foster the necessity of new proletarian institutions.

In 1978, during his first exile in France,<sup>5</sup> Negri gave a seminar on Marx's *Grundrisse* at the *École Normale Supérieure*, invited by Louis Althusser. The lessons it contains provide the most comprehensive systematization of Negri's thought in the 70s, synthesizing the theoretical content of the decade's numerous pamphlets beyond their immediate propagandistic function, while situating them in what was by then the obvious closure of *autonomia*'s insurrectional capacity. The lessons were published in the following year as *Marx Beyond Marx*.

Negri's effort to build a theoretical basis for *autonomia* is grounded both in the conceptual repertoire advanced by *operaismo* and in the problematic of value that Marx first formulated in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and whose final form would appear in *Capital, Volume I*.

As we've seen in the previous chapter, the role of labour within Marx's category of alienation changes over time. Whereas labour is inherently alienated in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, from the *Grundrisse* onwards, labour is split into concrete and abstract labour, which *Capital, Volume I* will later attribute to the twofold nature of the commodity.

Commodities possess both a use-value and an exchange-value. Their use-value consists in the usefulness of a given commodity, that is, its capacity to fulfill a need in a practical context. Use-value is contingent on the subject's changing needs. Exchange-value, on the contrary, pertains to the value that every commodity expresses in relation to every other commodity on the market (e.g., a pair of boots is worth three belts). Here, the commodity form begins to show itself in the fact that it is produced not for a concrete use, but for sale on the market. The commodity's exchange value does not ultimately depend on the sensuous characteristics that determine its concrete usefulness; instead, exchange value depends on the form of social relations that produced it (the contradiction between capital and labour in the wage relation). Thus, exchange value is autonomous from use-value, "free of all its sensuous qualities."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Negri's first exile happened after the state charged *autonomia* militants with sedition in 1977. These were dropped after a few months.

<sup>6</sup> Marx, *Capital, Volume I*. 128.

While the anarchic encounter between commodities on the market might produce arbitrary exchange values, the repetition of these exchanges over time determines the concrete exchange value of commodities. Marx claims that the exchange value of a given commodity is determined by the *quantity* of human labour necessary for its production and that this labour is *abstract* inasmuch as its value is determined independently of its *concrete, qualitative* social and technical particularities. This is the law of value. All qualitative differences between human acts of labour are levelled down to a quantitative basis that allows them to be measured, namely, the quantity of time spent in the production of a given commodity. Just as the commodity form arises from the production of goods for sale as opposed to use, human labor becomes *abstract* labour when its sole purpose is to contribute to the abundance of commodities for sale on the market. Therefore, value is grounded in labour only inasmuch as it is “human labour in the abstract:” “There is nothing left in them in each case but the same phantom-like objectivity; they are merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour i.e. (...) as crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values – commodity values.”<sup>7</sup>

The double nature of the commodity determines the twofold nature of labour. Even in the basest and most absurd labour tasks, one never truly abandons the framework of abstract productivity established within this double nature. Such abstract forms emerge from how productive action is determined by the commodity form. Exchange can only truly take place when commodities meet through a structure of equivalence, that is, when two use-values are capable of being compared through a third term that establishes their relative equivalence. It is only inasmuch as they appear to each other as congealed human labour that they find a common element that enables their comparison. Exchange-value, then, is the form of quantitative appearance of value in itself, of a social form that renders all use and all labour indifferent.

Marx’s theory of value establishes a double-ended, but thoroughly connected, problem: on the one hand, waged labour becomes a condition of survival, of access to wealth within its commodity form. On the other hand, such survival in itself is determined

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 128.

by the alienation presupposed in such form. Not only one labours in order to live but one lives in order to labour.

The systematization of social needs through the double nature of commodity-form establishes hostile and abstract social institutions concerned exclusively with their own reproduction, a reproduction that tendentially evolves towards crisis, as will be shown further on. The opposition between labour and its alienation first drafted in the 1840s by Marx finds a more complex expression in *Capital, Volume I*: value is not merely the expression of human alienation, nor are the figures of property or profit merely opposed to real human interests. Rather, value is a form of command inasmuch as it implements and sustains the abstract, quantitative framework for exploitation. The extraction of surplus-value is only possible when time and effort are already systematically organized through quantification. It is the value-form that allows specific historical categories of labour and time to emerge as money-producing abstractions. Only within value as social form can surplus-value be alienated from labour, only with value as an ontological given can the violence of profit and expropriation emerge as a natural process.

Whereas Volume I of *Capital* focuses on an exposition of the unfolding categories of capital that, Negri claims, leaves no space for class antagonism, the *Grundrisse* present a more complete account of Marx's critique, for in it the law of value is inherently exploitative and antagonistic.

Negri claims that grounding value in labour inherently presupposes exploitation, which is wholly explicit in the category of money: "there is no logical pathway from the analysis of the commodity to that of value and surplus-value: there is no middle term, the middle term is a literary fiction, a pure mystification which does not even comprehend a bit of truth. To make money the representation of value is to make it the exclusive form of the functioning of value."<sup>8</sup> The refusal of such a middle term implies the refusal of a form of value capable of functioning as a grounding mediation between labour and capital, where the development of the productive forces through their participation in the development of capital would come to develop a form of socialism.

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<sup>8</sup> Antonio Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979). 35.

Negri finds evidence for this antagonism when money becomes the primary expression of value, that is, when money becomes “the form of social relations.”<sup>9</sup> “Money has the advantage of presenting me immediately the lurid face of the social relation of value; it presents value, straightaway, as commanded exchange, organized for exploitation. I do not need to sink my hands in Hegel to discover the double face of the commodity, of value: money has only one face, that of the boss.”<sup>10</sup> As Tronti had already claimed, money implies the conflation of value and surplus-value; money deliberately hides exploitation. The wage struggles of workers, disregarded by the PCI’s political and geopolitical concerns, revealed themselves to be not only more conscious of the social relations of production but to be the struggles which determined the content of class itself.

If value is inherently exploitation, then communism cannot take the form of value overcoming value and it cannot, as Panzieri had already said, involve the expansion of waged labour. Negri claims “waged labour [is the] production of value, and of money as an instrument of its circulation and command. Any progress in the socialization of the form of circulation is an advancement in the contents of exploitation: it is thus the progress of this axis that must be destroyed, as well as all the ideological and institutional forms that dynamize it and foster it.”<sup>11</sup> If money mediates the expansion of capital through circulation, then workers’ struggles around money are not struggles for the fair distribution of value, but struggles around the immediate antagonistic relation set by, and within, money.

Negri sustains this idea through Marx’s claim that the increasingly social character of production—the division of labour—needs exchange-value, an equivalence amongst commodities. As money, Marx claims, exchange-value “establishes itself as a power external to and independent of the producers”<sup>12</sup> as an element of hierarchical command. The contradictions are not created by money, rather, their development creates the need for the “seemingly transcendental”<sup>13</sup> category of money. The inherently antagonistic

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 146, cited by Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

operation of forced separation and forced equivalence amidst producers and commodities can only fully function as capital if it is totally subsumed within the regime of money.

Beyond the general flux of acts of exchange, “in this role as the motor of circulation, as the deep actor of the unity of the market, money is also the fixation of the reification and autonomization of the general equivalent.”<sup>14</sup> As total mediation, money dictates production as exchange value. Circulation is not only a sphere of distribution, but one of command. Marx presents money as a “power over the individuals which has become autonomous.”<sup>15</sup> Negri reads this power as command-as an order to entail a specific behaviour-, not as alienation over individuality, in the sense that the forced reconversion of all production and all objects into a regime of equivalence is always already their inclusion in a determinate distribution of power. All in all, money is subsumption, but subsumption to a particular configuration of power. It is power in motion and it becomes necessary when capital faces resistance. “Political society” Negri says, is organized by exploitation:

But we have the position of money within the project of dominion of the capitalist class every time capital must reground its command over crisis—over the insurgency of workers’ use-value. (...). Marx’s approach to the theory of surplus-value could not be more pregnant and precise: from the general form of dominion to its productive specificity, where the general and social form of dominion is that which characterizes command, where productive specificity shows where antagonism is located.<sup>16</sup>

Negri’s argument is directed towards PCI’s orthodox Marxism, but unlike most analysis of the value-form,<sup>17</sup> Negri’s reading of the *Grundrisse* sees Marx’s law of value as providing an account of antagonism not present in *Capital, Volume I*. Instead, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx distinguishes parallel, but clearly opposed, dynamic categories within capital. On the one hand, the dialectical unfolding of the categories of value, on the

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<sup>14</sup> Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 146, cited by Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Cf. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

other, the opposing development of the categories of use, salary, and, finally, communism. In the middle, nothing:

[T]he theory of surplus-value demonstrates one thing: that socialism can only be a mystification of the competition and the social hegemony of capital, that—outside ideology, in reality—socialism is as impossible as the functioning of the law of value. The Marxism of the *Grundrisse* is in effect the contrary of socialism: as much as socialism is a hymn to the equivalence and the justice of social relations (constructed on the law of value), so much Marxism shows the law of value and socialism to be lies. The only reality we know is the one ruled by theft, capitalist alienation and the objectification of living labor, of its use value, of its creativity. To make all of that function according to the law of value, supposing it were possible, would modify nothing. Because there is no value without exploitation.<sup>18</sup>

Like Panzieri and Tronti before him, Negri follows these parallel currents into the spheres of circulation and reproduction, the “social factory” where class struggle becomes the conflict between a socialized worker and a socialized capital through real subsumption. Inasmuch as the socialization of the law of value is also its totalization—the capture of all social spheres within a unified field of exploitation—it would appear that class contradictions would also seemingly see themselves subsumed in the process. Against this, Negri underlines the following:

the dynamic unity of the process of surplus-value does not, in any way, eliminate the separation of the subjects (wage labour and capital), but rather continually pushes each mediation (value form, money, forms of work or exchange, etc.) to its point of contradiction and its supersession. Crisis and class struggle are articulated so profoundly that the first takes on, within this antagonistic dialectic, the form of catastrophe, while the second takes on the form of communism—the real, physical pole of an implacable will, necessary to eliminate the adversary. (...) Outside of antagonism, not only is there no movement, but the categories do not even exist.<sup>19</sup>

The question of the totalization of capital is not whether antagonism is capable of withstanding the synthesizing of all differences within valorization, but rather how

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<sup>18</sup> Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 9.

antagonism itself becomes the fundamental feature of the totalization and autonomization of capital.

Whereas in early *operaismo* the forms of refusal remained either apparently undetermined or bound to the concrete political legacy of the workers' movement—the party form—here Negri seeks to unearth a category that is capable of systematizing these abstract and concrete expressions within the concept of living labour, the actual labour that adds value to fixed capital.

The political program and the self-consciousness that Negri aimed to build with the wildcat workers movements of the late 60s and 70s was contingent upon the possibility of deriving new political categories from such antagonism: it had to offer positive, concrete political forms.

The autonomy of capital that Negri theorized found its first, tentative conceptualization in Marx's aforementioned problematic of real subsumption. If abstract social labour determines the value of each commodity as a productive average of all labours, this implies that productivity varies across private enterprises. Competition amongst capitalists rests on their different capacity to extract surplus-value from labour. Over time, the particularities of each enterprise even out, to the extent that workers are free to choose a different employer and capitalists are able to copy each other's productive means.

Such levelling of productivity through competition entails that capital extends working hours to their bearable limit to maximize the extraction of surplus-value. Workers' struggles seek to limit this extension, which in turn forces capital to increase production through other means—either through techniques that systematize labour more efficiently or through machines that shorten the production time for each commodity. In "*Lenin in Inghilterra*", the article that signaled the shift from *Quaderni Rossi*'s analytical inquiries toward the openly programmatic content of *Classe Operaia*, Tronti advances the hypothesis of the primacy of workers' struggles by arguing that it is workers' resistance to the expansion of the working day that forces capital to restructure itself.



Real subsumption, thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter, is also a necessary consequence of the law of value and expresses its contradictory terms. The law determines each commodity's exchange value according to the socially necessary labour time required for its production while exerting downward pressure on this labour time in accordance with the requirements of surplus-value.<sup>20</sup> In real subsumption, one sees the law of value as tending toward crisis:

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition – question of life or death – for the necessary.<sup>21</sup>

Understood in terms of the transition from absolute to relative surplus-value, real subsumption is the material embodiment of this “moving contradiction”, in that it implies an ever-greater diminution of labour time *qua* “the sole source of wealth.” As we’ve seen in the previous chapter, real subsumption embodies the problem articulated in Panzieri’s concept of neo-capitalism, namely, the social expansion of the process of value extraction beyond the sites and circuits of production.

Pursuing *operaismo*’s intuition that real subsumption suggested a *new* capitalism, Negri reads the ongoing transformations in capital and the struggles against it through subsumption understood as crisis. Breaking with the PCI’s dialectic of the productive forces, Negri names this methodology “the method of the tendency.” This method seeks to grasp capitalism through the most intense expressions of its contradictions. Whereas Marxist dialectics—at least their hegemonic expression—presupposes a theory of transition that involves an accumulation of advances and retreats, the method of the tendency privileges the moment of rupture and argues that the more radical the rupture,

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<sup>20</sup> Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, 1038-39.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 91.

the more determinant it will be.<sup>22</sup> What determines structural change here are the acute forms of conflict, which ripple outward across the territory and class struggle more broadly. In *Marx Oltre Marx*, Negri writes:

[the concept of tendency] can be defined as the capacity to grasp the highest moment of development of class struggle, and, as such, of the development of capital, of removing it from the immediate determination to which it is fixed, and to assume instead the abstract concept in terms of necessary tendency of the process. This procedure inverts the current sense of determinations such as “abstract” and “concrete”: what seems more abstract (capitalist development in an underdeveloped society) becomes within the tendency the most concrete thing, and what is concrete and immediate is removed from the situation. True concrete is not the immediate but the set of all real determinations.<sup>23</sup>

In a Hegelian framework, by contrast, the moments of more intense antagonism would be nothing more than the partial appearance of larger forces at work, viz., the social relations of production in their totality. Thus, the most intense expressions of the contradictions of capital would never be capable of autonomously outstripping them as their conditions. Negri’s method of the tendency maintains just the opposite. Here, the gravitational poles of the condition and the conditioned are reversed: it is the immediate that determines the whole, not as absent any mediation, but as what lies beyond mediation.

In 1972’s “Crisi dello Stato Piano”, one of the pamphlets which would prepare the transition of *Potere Operaio* to organized *Autonomia*, Negri claimed that the processes of real subsumption were the “tendency thus far, but today tendency has made itself reality and presence.”<sup>24</sup> Faced with the political emergence of wage struggles and autonomy as workers reclaimed their use of socially produced wealth, capital responded with crisis: it opts to “abandon the law of value,” meaning that it chose to progressively abandon the classical apparatuses of production as the site of valorization, thereby separating value

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<sup>22</sup> Even so, as will become obvious, Negri’s understanding of the tendency also walks a fine line between rupture and reproduction. It is only inasmuch as the tendency remains within antagonism that is capable of sustaining such determination.

<sup>23</sup> Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Antonio Negri, “Crisi dello Stato Piano” (1972), in *I Libri del Rogo* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2006), 2.

from its grounding in abstract labour (which is precisely what was hinted in the issue of subsumption). Negri claims in the same pamphlet:

The exchange of labour-power is no longer something that occurs, with quantitative determinations and a specific quality, within the process of capital; rather, an interchange of activities determined by social needs and goals is now the presupposition of social production as such; and sociality is the basis of production. The labour of the single producer is posited from the outset as social labour. Hence the product of this overall social labour cannot be represented as exchange value, not even in the form of the proportional mediation of general labour and general control over it. Nor in the form of capitalist planning. Labour is already an immediate participation in the world of wealth.<sup>25</sup>

If all production is now socially mediated; if capital attempts to valorize reproduction, to make value emerge socially; then the quantitative function of value loses relevance, in the sense that the value of production cannot be reduced to any quantitative aspect. Money rules as political command, not as a quantity of wealth.

Negri's claim that the law of value has come to a historical end makes a fundamental break with most Marxist orthodoxies, for it derails the teleological determinism of the institutional workers' movement. Once social wealth, amassed through labour, stops being grounded in a concrete element, or in a general equivalent that binds exchange to a material representation of value, then all intangible aspects of social life are bound to assume an ideal form of value, which then becomes a disciplinary and despotic apparatus.

For Negri, this process fundamentally overcomes the Hegelian-Marxist framework in which social life and human consciousness is ruled by an autonomous abstract structure. Negri's claim that the law of value has come to an undialectical end breaks with the Marxist structure of abolition, supersession, and elevation (*aufhebung*). The authoritarian structure of capital becomes independent of whether this law is in force or not, while the question of a transition to communism comes to hinge on the possibility of rupturing such a structure's command. This line of inquiry pushes Negri to abandon, or at least revise, one of the fundamental traits of Tronti's *operaismo*. In positing a "true"

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 21.

liberation of labour through workers' "valorization", Negri takes up a positivity that is non-existent in Tronti's work and that is ultimately unsustainable, as will become evident below.

## II. The *ceto politico* of use-value

Negri sought to unleash an almost messianic antagonism that, at the same time, would contradictorily double as a new way of managing production. This untenable tension would be tentatively synthesized in Negri's attempt to derive a structured political form for *autonomia*.

In an *autonomia* pamphlet from 1977, Negri states:

The law of value's function of mediation is surpassed by its metamorphosis, by its functioning as a law of command (...) When the law of value morphs into command, the capitalist absorption of labour-power has already found its limit—and such, this limit is the limit of the intensification of global exploitation and devalorization. The limit is the opposing process, it's the industrial working class and proletarian valorization against capital, against its circuits of valorization. Industrial labour<sup>26</sup> starts here to reconfigure as freed labour, as refusal of labour in its capitalist socially subsumed form. Antagonism is the keystone of the liberation of labour.<sup>27</sup>

Negri claims that, within the collapse of the law of value, the concreteness of use-value regains a political status that tendentially distances it from any totalizing determination, inasmuch as such concreteness is bound to the immediacy of class struggle. The dialectical hold between use-value and exchange-value, that bound use to the accumulation of social wealth, on the one side, and to social reproduction, on the other, falls when use itself is split along the previously mentioned lines of antagonism. Yes, use as accumulation, reproduction and even alienation, but also use as antagonism.

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<sup>26</sup> "*Lavoro Operaio*" in the original.

<sup>27</sup> Antonio Negri, "Per la Critica della Costituzione Materiale" (1977), in *I Libri del Rogo* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2006), 216.

As explicated in the previous chapter, one possible solution to the *aporia* of Marx's concept of labour, comes in the refusal of labour, which finds its concrete substance in an antagonistic form of use. Negri's claim that use-value can be opposed to exchange value needs to be grounded in something other than the immediate usefulness of the commodity, or the way that normative forms of use reproduce the class as an element within the extraction of surplus-value. Antagonistic use-value cannot refer to the mere instrumental or reproductive function of each and every commodity, through which use would become a simple hypostatization of the commanding function of circulation and of the allocation of social resources planned by capital.

Marx's claim that there is a concrete use-value "that may constitute an opposition to capital<sup>28</sup>" is supplemented by the following remark by Negri:

the definition of productive value must be taken to that level of abstraction and antagonism that seem essential to the construction of a theory of surplus-value. (...) In effect, looking at these pages (...) productive labour presents itself in another fashion: as workers' "use value," as the labour of a participant in exchange that "opposes the other one as capitalist." Labour is productive only when it produces its contrary.<sup>29</sup>

Here, the moment where labour meets capital is always already antagonistic inasmuch as the only positive content of labour resides in its resistance to becoming value. That labour is forced to appear as exchange affirms that it is also always already something other than such exchange, something opposed to it, even if not expressed as such. As Marx said:

The use value which the worker has to offer to the capitalist, which he has to offer to others in general, is not materialized in a product, does not exist apart from him at all, thus exists not really, but only in potentiality, as his capacity. It becomes a reality only when it has been solicited by capital, is set in motion, since activity without object is nothing (...). As soon as it has obtained motion from capital, this use value exists as the worker's specific, productive activity; it is his vitality itself, directed toward a specific purpose and hence expressing itself in a specific form. In the relation of capital and labor,

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<sup>28</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 262, cited by Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 183.

<sup>29</sup> Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 75.

exchange value and use value are brought into relation; the one side (capital) initially stands opposite the other side as exchange value, and the other (labor), stands opposite capital, as use value.<sup>30</sup>

Negri develops the latent contradiction in Marx's concept of use by dividing it into two different meanings. Within the intensification of struggles, the synthesization of use within the twofold nature of the commodity breaks off: use becomes autonomous of value inasmuch as use becomes the enaction of a repertoire of antagonistic actions. It is not a question of finding a potential revolutionary meaning in the purported immediacy of use. On the contrary, the actions and intentions unfolding within struggles are themselves the sole form of use.

This process of reading use as the self-abolition of value, and not as its "natural" side, is close to the one Tronti carried out when he distinguished class from labour force. In both cases, the political understanding of the concept rejects grounding its potentiality either structurally or ontologically. "Use-value" and "class" are not emancipatory categories, rather, they become categories of disruption once their structural contradiction reaches a point of intensity where the dialectical hold breaks off—as in the method of the tendency explained above. This, of course, depends upon the intensity of antagonism. The systematic organization of the extraction of surplus-value captures and manages the potential for an essential refusal whose intensity can, beyond a certain threshold, undo such dialectical grip: For Negri, "Communism is thus the destruction at the same time of the law of value, of value itself, of its capitalist or socialist variants. Communism is the destruction of exploitation and the emancipation of living labor, of non-labor."<sup>31</sup>

One could object that the immediacy of use in fact amounts to an argument against its presumed autonomy from capital. The very appearance of use as immediate, as prior to any other moment of the reproduction of capital, would make it the highest moment of alienation, where the most determined expressions of capitalist subjectivation would appear as natural urges, needs, and actions. True, immediacy cannot ground a systematic logic, epistemology, or rational structure. But such is precisely its force within

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<sup>30</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 267-68, cited by Negri, *Marx Oltre Marx*, 178.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 83.

the “party of anarchy”: once command generalizes to the point of ensuring the circulation and allocation of resources planned by capital, then its concrete interruptions and disturbances cannot but appear as unmediated. Just as the refusal of labour is elevated from disparate affects to a social category, the contradictory immediacy of use also rises to assume a social meaning by freeing itself from and expressly acting against command. Negri sees in use not only the concrete substance of the refusal of labour, but also the possibility of rebuilding an ontology of “freed” production.

The pamphlets that Negri organized for *autonomia* in the late 1970s would develop this problematic of use in terms of the concept of self-valorization. Negri’s contribution to the 1977 Bologna *autonomia* convention<sup>32</sup> is structured around the concept: “By self-valorization we mean the alternative that the industrial working class puts into action within the field of production and reproduction, appropriating power and reappropriating wealth, against the capitalist mechanisms of accumulation and development.”<sup>33</sup>

The positive reading of the refusal of labour took up the territorial, social, and material expansion of the movements’ infrastructures, along with its offensive apparatuses, to constitute a concept of value opposed to that of exchange value. Self-valorization didn’t just concern the antagonistic accumulation of power within the movement through social, material, and individual gains and structures; crucially, it was about how this wealth created a power capable of facing capital through the decomposition of capital’s structure of command.

Whereas for *operaismo* the material wealth of the capitalist mode of production was bound to the reproduction of command, as we’ve seen Alquati so aptly describe in the previous chapter, self-valorization seemingly suggests a use of goods whose general framework undoes capital’s command. The material enjoyment of wealth is always already determined by the workers’ antagonism to capital:<sup>34</sup> just as wage struggles are

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<sup>32</sup> The 1977 Bologna *autonomia* convention took place in September. It came as the last attempt to find a common organization to all the movement’s tendencies, but it quickly fell apart. Negri’s contribution aimed at the constitution of a party of *autonomia*. See <https://www.raipaly.it/programmi/febbre77>.

<sup>33</sup> Antonio Negri, “Il Dominio e Il Sabotaggio” (1977) in *I Libri del Rogo* (Rome:Derive Approdi, 2006), 269.

<sup>34</sup> Negri, “Per la Critica della Costituzione Materiale” (1977), in *I Libri del Rogo* (Rome:Derive Approdi, 2006), 218.

political because they seek to diminish capital's rate of profit, proletarian desire and use are similarly political in that they undo the capital's hold on subjectivity and attack the profit rate in one and the same gesture.

Negri's concept of self-valorization, however, does not prefigure communism, because its immediacy is not as exterior to alienation as Negri would have us believe. Instead, self-valorization is a stage within the dialectical development between the immediate practice of the refusal of labour and the need for a party capable of rupturing command and sovereignty. Self-valorization is an intermediary moment, from which the party emerges as the possibility of systematizing the capacity for attack, that is, as "the possibility of carrying self-valorization to the point of its negation, of increasing its own material independence to the point it inverts itself into totality."<sup>35</sup> Negri does not regard self-valorization by itself as inherently revolutionary; it only becomes so when understood through a dialectics of antagonism capable of positing the party as the concretization of the refusal of labor:

[T]he refusal of such dialectics creates the opposing positions of reformism (the uninterrupted continuity of the processes of self-valorization) and of extremism (the frail perseverance of the refusal of work). The price of these positions is illusion and appearance. It is, on the contrary, the materialist deepening of this dialectical paradox that might ground a theory of the party.<sup>36</sup>

I will return to this claim in Chapter IV. Negri returns to the stageist logic he so openly refused in positing self-valorization as an incomplete process that calls out to be actualized in the party form. This return of a dialectical logic is not due to Negri's call for the party of *autonomia*—there were plenty others during such period, which I will address in the next chapter. The return comes about mainly because his concept of self-valorization resurrects an idea of abstract labour.

Alienated labour reacquires a positive content in the concept of self-valorization, becoming a social and political effort whose aim is self-politicization: the class' political goals are embedded into its every action, be it the production of goods or the forms of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 237.



struggle it assumes. Self-valorization entails both production and insurrection: making a car, a communist journal, or a barricade are all expressions of self-valorization, inasmuch as all these actions are understandable within a framework of class antagonism. This equivalence, though, cannot but rest on the positive affirmation of an abstract equivalence amongst them, an abstract equivalence which, for Negri, cannot fully come into its own except through the formation of a party<sup>37</sup> that systematizes it into its full social actualization. The critique of orthodox Marxism rejected class struggle as a dispute over production, affirming in its stead an open antagonism between classes. However, as abstraction, self-valorization reopens production as a problematic of appropriation and furthermore inscribes it into a stageist process. The law of value does collapse, but value as the reification of human relations in abstract institutions does not.

In other words, through self-valorization Negri posits a fundamental contradiction within the framework of antagonism drawn thus far. Real subsumption meant that all value-grounded mediation became increasingly void, surviving only as command. The cooperation between labour and capital in the development of the productive forces collapsed inasmuch as the material wealth sprung forth by capital came to be seen as a) inherently bound to the reproduction of capital's hierarchical structures; and b) void of any social meaning to the workers forced to churn out commodities in an increasingly absurd fashion.

Negri, however, reconstructs both hierarchy and production—even if on different terms—by conferring upon them an antagonistic value within an understanding of human activity as always already bound to social abstraction. If self-valorization expands the refusal of labour either towards the (revolutionary) party or towards reformism, this is because self-valorization was indeed the productive element that *operaismo* saw as determining capital's development; the movement's radical concreteness was once

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<sup>37</sup> The question of the party of *autonomia* emerges time and again throughout the period of its duration. Its forms, compositions, and functions vary, but what defines the part of *autonomia* called organized *Autonomia* was precisely its striving for a synthesization of all the autonomous struggles in a new unified revolutionary party, which would however coalesce around the sovereignty of the workers' and territorial assemblies and committees. Negri played a major role within this tendency, which will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapters. Ironically, Negri's critique of Hegel, discussed next chapter, hinges precisely on the relation between potentiality and hypostatization.

understood as abstract productivity, even if this was not expressed in the money form. The “party of anarchy” becomes once again the party of a productive order, albeit a different one.

Negri’s problematic of self-valorization erases Tronti’s grounding distinction between class and labour-force. The political specificity of class is nullified when the antagonistic element is seen to rest not on the class’s partisanship vis-à-vis the labour force, but on a specific mode of value creation that mediates the class’ relation to struggle through commodity production, however contrary to the interests of capital.

Unlike Tronti, Negri does not identify a “positive content of alienation”, he makes such terms equal: alienation and antagonism become the same, rather than simultaneous. If antagonism implies the existence of an abstract institutional form, then it cannot be antagonism properly speaking, since such a form would embed antagonism within a logic of equivalence. This seems to be the unresolved, decades-long problem at the core of Negri’s work. The affirmation of an antagonism inherent to capitalist social relations is a *posteriori* grounded in the emergence of new abstract categories of production, which cannot be anything other than a step backwards into always new abstractions. This is what most thoroughly distinguishes Negri from Tronti. The Trontian opposition (class versus labour-force) was fundamentally *destituent*: it was deeply grounded in a Schmittian friend/enemy distinction that simply abandoned the primacy of material productive relations. Negri’s methodological approach, however, is grounded on the possibility that new subjective forms of labour carry on being categories of abstract production. Thus, Negri maintains a fundamentally ambiguous position in that his systematic critique of capital must simultaneously justify a latent insurrectional antagonism and the necessity of binding such antagonism to a form of social production, and hence, to a programmatic structure.

Negri reduces alienation to the law of value, a real abstraction that first and foremost grounds exploitation. Abstraction in itself, as alienation of species-being, is the brutality of exploitation; it is a mere expression of the dispossession of exploitation that comes after, not before, the productive process. The law of value feeds on living labour, and living labour forces it to transform and expand, to grasp ever new dimensions under its command. When the law of value “is abandoned” this simply means that the

apparatus that turns productivity into power has shifted its form and turned to new sources of capitalization. However, it also means that the ontological ground of proletarian power, justified by its productive might, also falls short. Simultaneously absurd and apocalyptic, human labour under real subsumption can no longer hold any emancipatory essence.

It is here that we find a lingering contradiction between Negri the militant-philosopher and Negri the political leader. The contradiction is not between the scientist and the politician, since *operaismo*'s epistemology of the partisan point of view embraces this coincidence. The contradiction, on the contrary, is between the militant subject, that is, the protagonist of a political composition of both class and capital, and the political leader, the political elite, the *ceto politico* (political class), which, never mind the aforementioned collapse of the law of value, seems obliged to theoretically reconstruct a revolutionary possibility. Negri reconstructs a theory of value through self-valorization.

The concept of the *ceto politico* appears periodically in *autonomia*'s informal discourse. Much like *movimento*, discussed in the next chapter, *ceto politico* is a concept whose widespread use in *autonomia*'s argot never directly translates into its conceptual repertoire (a telling blind spot). It refers to the charismatic, performative, and operative inner cadre of any of the movement's factions which, even in the purported informality and horizontality of the assemblies or collectives, assures their functional, ideological, and identitarian reproduction. The *ceto politico* is an informal vanguard within the vanguard, or rather, the part of the vanguard which materializes and manages its self-conscience.

Negri's militant philosophy is a thorough function of the *ceto politico*. It sought to build a critical and theoretical apparatus capable of providing the movement with an analytical apparatus that could double as a framework for its self-consciousness. Such concepts were not only deductive categories, but they also played a tactical role in the confrontations between the movement and the state on the one hand and, on the other, the movement and the institutional left. Despite the fact that Negri brandishes his refusal of dialectics against the PCI, the gesture of aiming to provide *autonomia* with the means of its self-consciousness and of circulating these within its informal leaderships is

firmly inscribed within the orthodoxy of the workers' movement. Sergio Bologna comments on this in a 2001 interview:

Keep in mind that, in fact, the thought of organized *Autonomia*, in particular the thought of Toni Negri, is a system of thought which in a certain sense has theorized ambiguity. Exactly on this point: the relationship between political elites [*ceti politici*], ideology and movement. This attempt to refuse Leninism, to say essentially that the political forms of today are dynamic political forms which open (and) close, which are not permanent. Obviously, it was a way of hiding, shall we say, the dialectic between the political elite [*ceto politico*] and the movement."<sup>38</sup>

Negri's "ambiguity" within *autonomia* is transported and inscribed in the theory drawn therein. The succession of conceptual formulations akin to self-valorization that periodically pop up in Negri's work—far beyond the 70s<sup>39</sup>—always aim to mediate between the spontaneity of movements and the establishment of an inner vanguard, a hyper-vanguard, which, from inside (Negri would claim: "from below") aims to synthesize the movement's perceptions into their own political, tactical, and identity categories. The *ceto politico* is the vanguard's vanguard, institutionally and hierarchically indistinct from the rest of the movement (or the class), but nevertheless presumably in charge of carrying out the epistemological functions which ground the class's consciousness of itself, meaning, of creating the concepts and categories which allow for the class to function as such. Negri's formulations of the autonomy of use-value are conceptually grounded on the need to make the class understand itself and, within his claim of class primacy, such self-perception is politically more important than any disarming account of alienation. Regardless of the soundness of such conceptual proposals, a question remains concerning the outline of the specialization of such tasks vis-à-vis the espoused horizontality of the movement: the nature of the charismatic, but informal, power that emerges within the spontaneity and antagonism of autonomous struggles. The following chapter will thoroughly address this.

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<sup>38</sup> Sergio Bologna and Patrick Cuninghame, "For an analysis of *autonomia*: An Interview with Sergio Bologna," in *Left History* 7.2 (2001), 89-102.

<sup>39</sup> Constituent power, precariat, the multitude, etc.

Such a problem is not exclusively Negri's. Tronti's grounding claim of the political difference between class and labour-force aims to unsheathe the full and savage might of the class from the hold of its institutions. It also, however, tentatively opens one of the unresolved questions of the Italian '68, viz., that of the relation between class and its political forms.

If labour-force is defined through participation in capital, and such participation is mediated through the institutions of the workers' movement, then class stands opposed to such institutions in concrete and general terms. What remains open is the relation of the class to its own political forms, or between antagonism and its *ceto politico*, its political elites. The question of leadership (which, politically, is thoroughly different from the question of hierarchy) remains unsolved. *Operaismo* claims class itself is the vanguard, inherently politicized, automatically organized along political lines, but this statement is problematic when taking into account Tronti's division between class and labour-power. On the one hand, *operaismo* questions the division between depoliticized class and vanguard party, meaning, it questions the assumption that political forms must hinge on a dialectic between specialized and passive elements. The vanguard is neither the specialized party nor the universal class, but rather an element unfolding in their threshold: a class partiality vis-à-vis the extension of the labour-force. But on the other hand, this gesture merely displaces such division elsewhere, for labour-force persists as the depoliticized category whose existence is dialectically necessary for the existence of a force capable of pushing the questions and making the decisions that it can't make for itself.

Negri's concept of self-valorization attempts to solve these questions by positing class as self-valorization at the same time it reconstructs the theoretical need for a vanguard within the vanguard. With the latter move, Negri opens *autonomia* to the same teleological stageism that he so boldly denounced in the PCI. To fully understand the dimensions of antagonism emerging from the refusal of labour within real subsumption, it becomes necessary to abandon an idea of the refusal of dialectics and instead focus on how this refusal collapses within its own logical framework.

### III. The end of dialectics

To question Negri's analysis of the collapse of the law of value does not mean to refuse the whole problematic. Such a collapse of the law of value fundamentally transforms all political categories. Within Marx's ontology of labour, the process of transition between formal and real subsumption occurs in the general process of subjectivation in which human activity mediates its own relation to nature. Human activity, directly or indirectly, becomes a quantity, a measure of value, and as such becomes qualitatively equivalent to all others, or, as Camatte says, a general equivalent that replaces gold.

This value matrix becomes self-sufficient and autonomous, establishing a sphere of total objectivity that engulfs and absorbs social and individual life, which are now but various forms of the fundamental alienation at the core of labor. Equivalence does not reduce everything to one, rather, it grasps everything according to one abstract quantitative measure. Equivalence is neither the one nor the many, but rather, an all-encompassing differentiation, in which all entities exist only to the extent that they have always already been measured by the value form. As capital's social relations expand, this measure determines ever more social processes, that is, real subsumption not only captures all social life, but it also prevents the modalities and categories of social life from being perceived as such, from being named, from being grasped. Real subsumption is a constitutive mode of abstract perception.

If this process can be periodized without being essentialized, if the transition, both historical and logical, between formal and real subsumption can be thought historically without positing a human essence or a "natural" labour, then it becomes clear how a positivist understanding of dialectics is suspended with the category of real subsumption.

Subsumption refers to a logical process within German Idealism where the manifold perceptions are all reunited under one single form. Hegel's concept of "category" explains precisely how manifold concrete perceptions are singled and united into a single abstract form that encompasses all of them with their variations. This doesn't mean that every perception is bound to a single category, but rather that the

common features within varied perceptions can constitute a category. But categories are not static concepts. Rather, within them a dialectic tension is to be found, precisely in the way its different elements come to define such category and the way each category comes to define different elements, or rather, how manifold intuitions come to derive a category or how a category creates the capacity to derive always new intuitions.

If subsumption reduces this process to mere quantification, then this curtails the dialectical, subjective processes of perception. For if the principal category of subjectivation–labour–cannot assume its role as the mediation between perception and individuality, technique and object, nature and wealth, collective and individual, and so on, then the truly subjective dimension of human existence is suspended. Suspended, but not stopped. Subsumed labour presupposes a process of subjectivation, Marx's *species-being*, inasmuch as it establishes a productive subject, a subject defined through its productive relationship with nature. But such production, whether individual or social, never truly comes to posit a world beyond that of value and of the material expressions of value. Workers are forever making a material world that never truly comes about as an object of their own making for their own use.

If the wealth produced under capital tentatively comes about as control and alienation, if value is a category that can only reproduce itself, if the subjects of value are forever stuck in larval subjectivations and frozen abstractions, then labour—as social measure of recognition, as means of production, as origin of all social wealth—is no longer the element mediating class struggle. Communism as the emancipation of labour in a society of free producers is no longer possible as the dialectical result of history. Capital's social structure, where validation and recognition are contingent upon one's contribution to the reproduction of society, seemingly starts to collapse as well, since labour never really concretizes subjectivation.

#### **IV. Antagonism**

Negri witnessed the collapse of the dialectical method in orthodox Marxism and readily claimed a shared responsibility: the workers themselves had refused dialectics. But even if the refusal of labour was an element in such collapse, Negri's attempt to

reconstruct a different dialectics of labour within its refusal nonetheless reconstructs a systematization of value, but this time as ideology.

The question then remains: what is the proper relation between antagonism and real subsumption if labour's element of dialectical subjectivation is no longer present?

Subsumption affirms itself as equivalence. If the play of singular forces is reduced to mere equivalence, then synthesis can only come about as the negation of the process of their mutual influence and transformation, as suspension, interruption, as nullification of any potential for development. This seems valid both for the labour process— where singular and concrete labours stop short of subjectively building any social meaning—and for the social relations grounded in it.

The perception of injustice, indignity, humiliation, unfairness, or non-recognition implicit to exploitation is bearable inasmuch as it is either socially codified within an individual or collective meaning or if it takes place within a temporality of redemption that will compensate all for their drudgery. The toil of everyday life is tolerable inasmuch as it makes each worker a valued member of society, inasmuch as it builds within him the certainty of a self and the social recognition that validates his role within the social hierarchies and rules into which he is born. This sacrifice made towards the “common good” is worthwhile inasmuch one will later be recognized for one's self-abandonment: be it the assured material and affective care for the elderly, after-life salvation, or the recognition of later generations. That such temporal and social structures of recognition are blatantly ideological does not undermine their power of social synthesis, nor the processes of subjectivation at work in them. Despite their development, however, the advance of the abstraction already at work within them seems to endanger the whole ontological edifice of which they form but a part.

If real subsumption, as the value form's totalization of all aspects of social and phenomenal life in real abstraction, truly expands to include everything, then this includes the alleged temporal and affective structures of recognition that subtend social life. If neither labour nor society grant any individual the validation they require, then the immediate drudgery of labour, the opposition to it, to those who command it, has to find different forms of appearance.



This is where antagonism comes in. Antagonism is neither resistance nor struggle, at least not necessarily. Antagonism is a refusal which is not pure—it requires the polluted mediation of labour or any other element—but which never finds a final concrete form. In its most radical expression of refusal or in its most despairing submission, whether it is self-conscious or not, whether its opposing power is clearly perceived or not, antagonism never finds the cathartic mediation that would allow it to come to terms with itself. Rather, antagonism is the opposition which always remains unresolved, a radical refusal which no mediation can concretize as victory, defeat or redemption. What emerges, on the contrary, is the motive of exile, in the sense that the terms of *aufhebung* are abandoned: antagonism's actualization occurs through secession rather than through affirmation.

Negri attempted to identify a social form of struggle, but through only one of its many forms of appearance, viz., that of the workers struggles of Italy's industrial north, which went on to influence the repertoires of political action in other segments of society. The fleeting, unmediatable nature of these struggles forced him to seek its fixation by rescuing alternative, abstract forms of production. Against this, but still firmly within the critical corpus of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, a different analysis can be put forward, one that locates antagonism's condition of possibility not in its capacity to constitute new mediations, but in its capacity to undo them—even as they emerge in the course of struggle. This is what we grasp when we view such social movements beyond how they were (and sometimes still are) represented by their *ceto politico*, as the next chapter will do.

Even if Marx suggests that non-alienated labour has never existed, he does offer fleeting definitions of what it could be. It is first and foremost the process by which an individual creatively objectifies their own specific character. Such an experience would satisfy one's social faculties in the sense that the use that others make of one's creation or one's labour would come as a pleasant experience that mediates one's social relations and give rise to an affirmative perception of the species.<sup>40</sup> That we can conceive this idea implies, even if only faintly, that different conditions of social life are imaginable and thus possible. We also glimpse this in the realms of collective and

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<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, "Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*" (1844a), in *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1975), 277.

affective life, where moments of cooperation do indeed take place; but they do not ever truly coalesce into the burgeoning mode of production that would in Marx's view constitute them as an actual opposition to capitalism, nor do they totally escape the normative affectual forms of capitalist social relations.

Yet Marx's definition of non-alienated labour is limited, to the extent that he begins from the problematic of production and presumes that such labour would necessarily consist in overcoming need and poverty by making concrete wealth generally available to all. However, if we take into account that Marx's concept of non-alienated labour rests on an idea of metabolic subjectivation that only afterwards comes to define itself as productive, we can also understand as non-alienated labour any social activity whose purpose lies in the emancipatory potential of what Marx considers to be the true essence of humanity. Hence, non-alienated labour cannot refer to a mode of production, but to an ethical form of which has production as one of its moments. This becomes clear when Marx claims, in his commentary on James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*, that "our mutual product, therefore, is the means, the mediation, the instrument, the acknowledged power, of our mutual needs over each other."<sup>41</sup>

That non-alienated labour is not the dialectical antithesis of alienated labour becomes evident when Marx's later critique of political economy thinks the contradictions of labour using the distinction between abstract and concrete labour (as in *Capital, Volume I*), or that of living and dead labour (as in the *Grundrisse*). In the former case, both abstract and concrete labour are subsumed by the value form and are thus alienated. In the latter, alienated labour prevails because every living instance of labour is forced into activity by a hostile world that has always already been produced as dead labour and which continually requires living labour for its reproduction.

With the wage form, the expropriation of labour becomes more evident and thus defines the concrete field of class antagonism. Marx's description of wage labour recalls images of civil war and blatant oppression, rather than those of natural loss evoked in the descriptions of alienated labour, as when he writes, wage labour "is determined by

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 276.

the fierce struggle between capitalist and worker.”<sup>42</sup> Or, “the worker has not only to struggle for his physical means of subsistence; he must also struggle for labour, i.e. for the possibility and the means of realizing his activity.”<sup>43</sup> Or again, “the demand for labour necessarily regulates the production of men, as of every other commodity. The existence of the worker is reduced to the same condition as the existence of every other commodity.”<sup>44</sup>

It is precisely within this idea of antagonism that we can ground a non-productive understanding of non-alienated labour, something thoroughly heretical within Marx and Marxism, but nevertheless conceptually present. The political expressions of this antagonism are unconventional and includes the refusal of a labour that, “as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists (...) is shunned like the plague.”<sup>45</sup>

In order to supersede the idea of private property, the idea of communism is enough. In order to supersede private property as it actually exists, real communist activity is necessary. History will give rise to such activity, and the movement which we already know in thought to be a self-superseding movement will in reality undergo a very difficult and protracted process. (...) when communist workmen work together, their immediate aim is instruction, propaganda, etc. but at the same time they acquire a new need—the need for society—and what appears as a means has become an end. This practical development can be most strikingly observed in the gatherings of the French socialist workers—smoking, eating, drinking, etc.<sup>46</sup>

A “need for society”—expressed as social “means”—signifies that this “society” is lived against labour, as an end: to struggle is a social need, and society, here understood as community—not production—is a means of struggle. Hence the general intuition that *operaismo* developed, that non-alienated labour can only exist as the refusal of labour, outside and against the dialectical problematic of production. In other words, only the refusal of labour can posit a truly dialectical moment within capitalist relations that temporarily abolishes or suspends the hold of capital. This moment includes some of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 365.

social relations and interactions that take place within the apparently contentless instances of shunning of labour—either through sabotage and absence or through the satisfaction of a need for community.

This is further supported by the *Grundrisse*'s commentary on the specificity of the relationship between labour and capital, which Tronti also mentions in *Operai e Capitale*, as we've seen. But whereas Tronti defines the partisanship of labour's point of view in order to establish the political primacy of production, Marx's description, however accommodating of Tronti's, establishes a slightly different opposition. Marx claims that the moment of exchange between labour and the wage is the point of contact between two very different operations. Whereas capital buys labour as a means to partake in the valorization of wealth, this is not so for the worker, since this exchange "brings him only subsistence, the satisfaction of individual needs, more or less—never the general form of wealth, never wealth."<sup>47</sup> Marx also speaks to this point when he writes, "It may seem peculiar, in this relation between labour and capital, and already in this first relation of exchange between the two, that the worker here buys the exchange-value and the capitalist the use-value, in that labour confronts capital not as a use-value, but as the use-value pure and simple, but that the capitalist should obtain wealth, and the worker merely a use-value which ends with consumption."<sup>48</sup>

Labour is "posited as non-capital as such" in the antagonism of the wage relation, exemplified in the moment of exchange.<sup>49</sup> Labour is:

not-objectified labour (...) not-raw material, not-instrument of labour, not-raw-product: labour separated from all means and objects of labour, from its entire objectivity. [It is] this living labour, existing as an abstraction from these moments of its actual reality (also, not-value); [It is] this complete denudation, purely subjective existence of labour, stripped of all objectivity. Labour as absolute poverty: poverty not as shortage, but as total exclusion of objective wealth. Or also as the existing not-value, and hence purely objective use value, existing without mediation, this objectivity can only be an objectivity not separated from the person: only an objectivity coinciding with his immediate bodily

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<sup>47</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 294.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

existence. Since the objectivity is purely immediate, it is just as much direct not-objectivity. In other words, not an objectivity which falls outside the immediate presence [Dasein] of the individual himself.<sup>50</sup>

If we take wealth here to mean not a transhistorical concept of abundance, but rather the normative and political quantification of production, then it becomes obvious how labour produces wealth, but does not partake in it. Labour's reproduction depends on the circulation of commodities established by wealth, but it does not participate in wealth since it does not enjoy its social and political privileges. Such non-determination is an antagonistic concrete expression of the positive content of alienation, since it opposes a need for community to the social abstraction of wealth, even if its forms of appearance are varied and contradictory, assuming social behaviors and shapes that are far removed from the classical workers' movement.

The apparent contradiction between labour as "absolute poverty" (hence as absolute non-determination) and labour as always already alienated now becomes graspable as a political and historical question. The extreme poverty of labour—its exclusion from wealth, from being objectified as wealth—coincides with the "bodily existence" and "immediate presence" of the individual. The impoverished bodily existence of the individual under capitalism is not in itself productive, since labour only becomes productive when it is already capital. The modern conditions of labour create a subject whose alienation is also a process of desubjectivation, the creation of bare life.<sup>51</sup> Marx's account of the progressive emergence of an ever-clearer concept of labour and wealth, which we've seen above, is in fact an account of the historical affirmation of the forces of increasing abstraction and not the unfolding of their logical truth.

*Operaismo's* general framework of class antagonism accommodates this reading of Marx when a different definition of the refusal of labour emerges: refusal of labour not as *aporia*, but as the mediations and phenomena that emerge from the processes of subjectivation and desubjectivation set within and against capital. If antagonism indicates the non-determination of labour vis-à-vis capital, then antagonism is the true

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Hence Marx's use of the figure of the proletariat as *Vogelfrei* in *Capital, Volume I*. The *Vogelfrei* is a figure whose murder carried no penalty, very similar to Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*.

condition of possibility of *species-being*. Antagonism must be understood as collective non-determination and not as autonomous productive wealth.

### Chapter III: *Movimento* and *Gemeiwesen*

I'm referring to, naturally, the Italian experience, the only one in which, after '68, political avant-gardism was restored with levels of efficiency and originality that were incomparable with every other European *gauchiste* endeavor. This is the hypothesis: that the good fortune of post-'68 political avant-gardes (let's say, until 74-76)–and it is difficult to find significant experiences outside of *operaismo*'s lodes, from *Potere Operaio* to *Lotta Continua*–was due to a sort of freezing of the tensions coming from a new social radicality within a neo-political cage (fed by hybrid-*operaisti*-maoist-leninist ideologies). The effectiveness of these experiences was more the fruit of a "desiring" charge diverted towards political ideologies already condemned by the "material" conditions that expressed them, than the result of the internal consistency of a Marxism no longer tenable unless held by empirico-eclectic embraces. "Dissident desire," already adequately identified in '68, resisted within the deviated form of a projection towards ideological-political forms that contradicted its sense and were constitutively unable to grasp it.

Furio Di Paola, "Dopo la Dialectica"<sup>1</sup>

The processes that I have attempted to describe in the previous chapters found their richest expressions in the mid-to-late 1970s. The struggles which *operaismo* had seen emerge from the generalization of the refusal of labour had consolidated over the late 1960s and early 1970s, reabsorbing all of the specialized political formations of '68 back into its original impetus. The *ceto politico* of *Potere Operaio*, *Lotta Continua*, and several other *partitini* had been surpassed by the factory and territorial struggles organized by autonomous workers committees and neighborhood associations, whose formal and informal networks would materialize in the movement known as the *area of autonomia*.

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<sup>1</sup> Di Paola, Di Paola. "Dopo la Dialectica" in *Aut-Aut* 165-166 (1978).

As I have tried to explain, this political area emerged on the basis of the radicalization of the refusal of labour, which in turn stemmed from the ambiguous nature of labour in the cycles of reproduction. That is, thanks to labour's indeterminacy under particular historical conditions, an open antagonism developed between the attempts to make labour work within capital's social and political apparatuses and the attempts to unshackle such labour from them. The latter liberatory gestures occurred either through the inquiry into the forms of its positive emancipation or through the destitution of the perceived forms of political command.

This chapter begins with a clarification of the movement of *autonomia* before moving on to show how *operaismo* laid the conceptual conditions that allowed *autonomia* to understand itself as a subject. I then turn back to Negri and his attempt to conceptualize this subjectivity as both an array of struggles (or subjectivities) and a centralized war machine (or a party). I will expose the limits of Negri's attempt by picking up where my critique of Negri in the previous chapter left off: Negri's framework seeks to systematize *autonomia* into a fixed framework whose categories are in fact thought beyond the original framework of *operaismo*. Hence, I will turn to other currents that make up the area of *autonomia*, notably, those embodied in the thought of Jacques Camatte and Giorgio Cesarano. These two thinkers figure as divergent theoretical poles that offer a different understanding of the movement, one that is better suited to grasping what I have attempted to present as the element of non-determination in partisan, communist becoming. The chapter ends with a discussion of Negri's reading of Hegel that summarizes the argument drawn thus far.

## I. *Autonomia* and/or movement

*Autonomia*'s historical, social, and political complexity present unique difficulties for its historiography. Its exceptionality vis-à-vis the structure and composition of most workers' and leftist organizations make it foreign to Marxist, socialist and anarchist



traditions, despite the fact that each of these traditions had a hand in its historical reality.<sup>2</sup>

In the previous chapter, I pitted a tentative theory of antagonistic exile against Negri's idea of a hyper-vanguard as irreconcilable attempts to understand *autonomia*'s revolutionary essence. This division concerned the role of mediation and political representation in *autonomia*—and here I would like to extend it further. *Autonomia*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Even though Italy had a considerable anarchist movement at the turn of the century, and even though *autonomia*'s insurrectional streak can definitely be traced back to some anarchist currents, notably the figure of Errico Malatesta, *autonomia*'s iconoclasm vis-à-vis the workers' movement also means a break from this tradition. First, whilst perhaps more radical than a lot of socialist currents, Italian anarchism remained firmly grounded in a defense of the social merit of labour and "order," something explicit in the famous slogan "anarchy is order without coercion." This is more akin to a perfect biopolitical regime than *autonomia*'s affirmation of savage desire. Second, *autonomia* develops its theory and concepts out of a Marxist cannon, namely, Marx, Lenin, and Mao. The anti-authoritarian streak emerges from the way these are read as insurrectional authors rather than as state apologists. Third, the anarchism of antagonism is different than the anarchism which proposes itself as a form of non-hierarchical government. *Autonomia* seeks the uprooting of order and command (hence its appreciation of Lenin and Mao) and, as such, as real-existing anarchism, as the destruction of the *arché*, rather than its total democratization. The distinction between anarchism and *autonomia* becomes confusing, however, inasmuch as the post-'68 conceptual renewal within anarchist movements happens indirectly through the expansion of the historical experience of *autonomia* to other places: Greece, Italy, and Spain, for example. German's '80s and '90s *Autonomen* were directly inspired by *autonomia*, as were the Greek and Spanish movements that, for different reasons, decided to erase the Marxist roots of *autonomia* [see Geronimo, *Fire and Flames: a history of the German autonomist movement*. (Oakland. PM Press 2012) and Espai en Blanc (ed.) *Luchas autónomas en los años 70*. (Madrid: Traficantes de sueños. 2008)], Contemporary anarchist currents, from Alfredo Maria Bonnano's Anarcho-Insurrectionalism to the Invisible Committee (even if they would challenge being perceived as "anarchist") passing through US collective Crimethinc. are all more grounded in the experience of *autonomia* than in a clear-cut anarchist tradition. This would mean that the historiography that splits anarchism and Marxism along the lines drawn during the First international is thoroughly discussible: rather than two different traditions we have a periodization of class movements based on the moments when they assume either hierarchical or anti-authoritarian expressions: such choices and forms are internal to the class, and do not stem from ideological legacies.

<sup>3</sup> This description follows the terms aptly set by Steve Wright, whose study on *operaismo*, *Storming Heaven* (2002) is the most thorough work available in English to date. Wright has been working on a forthcoming book on *autonomia*, parts of which have been posted online. This description is based on his article, "A Party of Autonomy?" See Steve Wright, "A Party of Autonomy?," Libcom.org, 2005 (acc: 01/05/2019), <https://libcom.org/library/party-autonomy-steve-wright>.

(capital “A”), or organized *Autonomia*, was a network of factory, neighbourhood, university and school committees that organized around *operaismo*’s affirmation of class autonomy from parties and unions. This network was enmeshed in a broader militant social circle, where it interacted with other political and countercultural groups. It was this broader milieu that came to be called the “area of *autonomia*” (small “a”). It included anarchist collectives, Maoist and Trotskyist *partitini* (small parties), pro-situationist groups such as *Ludd* and *Re Nudo*, as well as several feminist collectives, like *Sottosopra* and the Milan’s Women’s Bookshop. Moreover, it also included plenty of communal experiences, alternative schools, journals, magazines, newspapers, and affinity groups. Several groups within this broader milieu sought to unify them all or exert some kind of political or ideological hegemony over the movement. Historian Steve Wright portrays this inherently tense arrangement calling it “an uneasy alliance of regionally-based ‘micro-fractions<sup>4</sup>.’” As the area of *autonomia* grew, it developed another pole within its midst: a widespread communication apparatus of newspapers and radio stations. These were often connected to experimental and artistic ventures, such as Bifo’s *Radio Alice* and the *A/Traverso* journal (both based in Bologna). They were often also connected to neighbourhood pirate radio stations, such as *Radio Onda Rossa* in Rome. An account of this wide informal network would be incomplete without mentioning the numerous steward groups that had organized around *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua*, and which eventually became clandestine or semi-clandestine groups in armed struggle.

*Autonomia*, as such, refers to two different, but connected, phenomena. On the one hand, *Autonomia*, henceforth referred to as “organized *Autonomia*,” was a formal network of militant cadre deeply influenced by *operaismo*. On the other hand, the “area of *autonomia*” was a loose network of wildly different ideological groupings. This conceptual distinction was often more fluid and could not be made quite so neatly at any given historical moment. But, at the same time, one could also see it concretely express itself in the tensions already present within the ways that the movement understood itself conceptually and politically.

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, “A party of *autonomia*?” 2005

Unlike many other political and social formations, *Autonomia* wasn't named after a specific conceptual identity. The *autonomi* weren't "partisans of autonomy," and *autonomia* didn't involve advancing a political ideology of autonomy as self-sufficiency, as legitimate and cohesive sovereignty, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> Such ideologies were indeed present, as were the previously mentioned situationist, anarchist, Maoist, and even Stalinist factions, but to understand the term *autonomia*, one must refer it back to the union debates of the 1950s. In particular, one must trace it back to the debate spurred by the demand that union strategies should focus on the needs of the rank and file, rather than on the Communist Party's guidelines.<sup>2</sup> At the centre of these debates was the autonomy of the union in relation to the political direction of the party. From the party's viewpoint, "autonomy" meant the growth of economic—or "non-political"—demands within the rank and file and the dismissal of Cold War's geopolitical concerns, which the Party held to be at the forefront of its strategy. It also meant that the adventurist struggles of fractioned parts of the class could endanger the gains of the class as a whole, which hinged on the political strength of the PCI. This strength depended upon the stability of the political system in which PCI had grown and was always endangered by the looming threat of a new *coup*.

For the rank and file, on the contrary, the autonomy of their struggles signalled the mounting gap between their needs and the Party's direction. The term "autonomy" was chosen neither to denote a principle of social organization, nor a transcendental idea of self-regulation; instead, it first cropped up negatively, as autonomy *from*, not autonomy *to*. As such, the term is perhaps misleading, as the forms and practices to which it referred were certainly autonomous from institutional frameworks, but they didn't expressly strive for self-sufficiency or sovereignty.

Therefore, the conceptual challenge here consists of understanding the stakes of this "autonomy *from*" as a social form without reducing it to an abstract, negative freedom. As we've seen thus far, real subsumption drew out the latent problematic consisting of the refusal of labour *qua* antagonism and capital *qua* despotic force. Within

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<sup>5</sup> Hence the somewhat problematic claim of an "autonomist" Marxism. Negri's *operaismo* can certainly be systematized and grounded in a class "autonomy," but that doesn't mean that it necessarily takes into account the experience of *autonomia*.

this framework, the social form of the “area of *autonomia*” demands a conceptual elaboration beyond the various ideologies that associated themselves with it.

The area of *autonomia* spoke of itself as *the movement*. Examples of this use abound. The 2001 film *Paz!*<sup>6</sup> about Andrea Pazienza, a famous Italian counterculture cartoonist, addresses this elusive problematic. Set in late-1970s Bologna, the cartoonist’s alter-ego “Pentothal” falls asleep while drawing and slips into a delirious nightmare, where the movement is having a multitudinous assembly in his kitchen. The movement argues about “raising the level of confrontation” with the state, only stopping the passionate discussion to shout their slogans. In a corner of the room, a radical feminist calls out a young *lottarmatista*.<sup>7</sup> Overwhelmed, Pentothal whispers his discomfort just as an unexpected moment of silence opens up and everyone overhears him. The room is appalled. Pentothal’s revolutionary commitment is called into question. One of the movement’s charismatic leaders lays down the law for Pentothal:

You don’t care about anything because you’re an artist, but we do care. We don’t give a fuck if you’re an artist. You spend one single night at the university, but you boast about being a part of the occupation. You illustrate a couple of pamphlets, and think your conscience is clean. You read the movement’s journals every now and then, and you think you got a pulse for what’s happening. In reality, my dear, either you become PRO-DUC-TIVE for *the movement*, or you can go and FUCK OFF.<sup>8</sup>

Pentothal is confronted with “*the movement*,” not the social movement, not the workers’ movement, nor any other segment, but *the movement itself*. The movement appears as a raucous political assembly, not the sober meeting of professional militants. The movement commands certain efforts and affects, but these do not concern organizational tasks. Rather, they are at bottom a series of performative postures: attendance in the movement’s events, participation in its ideological and poetic

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<sup>6</sup> Renato Di Mario, *PAZ!* DVD (Rome: Rai Cinema, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> A supporter of armed struggle.

<sup>8</sup> The scene is portrayed slightly different in the comics that inspire the movie. Rather than being said by the meeting leader, the speech is internalized as Pentothal’s train of thought while dozing off on his desk. The scene can be seen here: [youtu.be/JPET09R1oFA](https://youtu.be/JPET09R1oFA).

discourse, the display of political consciousness, the need of being "productive for the movement."

The concept of "the movement" is used in similar ways all throughout *autonomia's* literature. Paolo Pozzi's novel *Insurrezione*<sup>9</sup> begins with a discussion about the *level* of the movement in different cities:

You should've seen what happened in Rome—Andrea starts—such a level of movement! Dozens of people firing their guns, never leaving the streets. They all wanted to be there in the most incredible way, nobody ran away. (...)—Yeah, thanks...—I answer him—but in Rome the *autonomi* are the strongest political group in the movement, not like here in Milan where we have *Democrazia Proletaria* and the *Movimento Lavoratori per il Socialismo*<sup>10</sup> on our backs with their wrenches.

Here, the movement is represented as a multiplicity of openly confrontational positions striving for hegemony. Here, as in *Paz!*, the strength of the movement is proportional to the level of confrontation with the state and to the collective commitment displayed within it. It is also akin to the film in representing the movement as a site of ideological dispute, where different factions strive for hegemony (here the *autonomi* mean organized *Autonomia*).

Both of these examples offer up a prosaic understanding of the movement:<sup>11</sup> the movement as a self-conscious political and social form, capable of momentarily

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<sup>9</sup> Paolo Pozzi, *Insurrezione* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2007). *Insurrezione* is a *bildungsroman* written by Paolo Pozzi in prison during the early '80s but not published until 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Maoist organizations. *Democrazia Proletaria* was a coalition of Maoist and extreme left parties. *Movimento Lavoratori per il Socialismo* was a Maoist offshoot of the 1968 student's movements.

<sup>11</sup> This concept of movement is quite different from the one used in most Marxist and Leninist theory, where a "movement" is either an incipient form of political action, lacking an organized structure, or a mere expression of civil society, concerned with a specific social issue, lacking a materialist perception of the totality of social relations. In contemporary terms, this depreciative use of the concept emerged as reaction to the new left's reformulation of the revolutionary subject, a process understood as an abandonment of the centrality of the working class in favor of single-issue campaigns. Chris Harman, a British political activist, in his 1984 article "The Women's Movement and Revolutionary Socialism," uses the term "movementism" to describe the abandonment of a political action firmly rooted in production and the

combining different subjectivities and political perspectives. While these factions share an insurrectionary tendency, a tension emerges between its rhizomatic composition and the need amongst some of its currents for a conceptual and political synthesis, that is, between the antagonistic dynamism of the movement and its *ceto politico*. Beyond all of this, movement also emerges as a closed social sphere, bound to multiple structures of social normativity.

Surprisingly, despite the remarkable conceptual productivity of the movement and its historical period, there was never an explicit problematization of “the movement” as such. Literature from the period often addresses the movement’s immediate political issues and phenomena, but it never concretely problematizes “movement” in its own right. It is as if substantivizing the movement, or turning it into a self-standing concept, would forcibly reduce the complexity of *autonomia* to a self-conscious political form.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the self-referential use of the term “movement” in the literature that came out of *autonomia* involved a wide-ranging polysemy. Throughout, “movement” is both a historical context and a dynamic process, both a quantitative, intensive threshold of political activity and the qualitative framework that this activity generated. This conceptual lacuna is analogous to the ambiguity within *operaismo* that I traced in the previous chapter, as is evident when Negri seemed to grasp the manifold expressions of movement as “self-valorization.” This ambiguity, however, is not due to the movement’s

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embrace of single issues that cannot have the universal appeal or the lasting momentum of proper workers’ struggles. Movementism’s partiality condemns it to failure and hence contributes to counter-revolutionary politics. Even so, movementism seems more of a strawman than an actual political position. Its critics (and creators) denounce the migration of political agency from the working class to other atomized forms, whereby emancipation is presumed to occur in a gradual improvement of existing social relations, which leads to a social economism. By contrast, *autonomia* critiqued capitalist social relations in part because they necessarily tend to subsume all aspects of existence and reduce different forms of life through absolute proletarianization. This proletarianization coalesces as an insurrectionary movement that expresses their estrangement under capitalism. See Chris Harman, “The Women’s Movement and Revolutionary Socialism,” *International Socialism*, Spring 1984, 3–41. For further contemporary critiques of movement, see Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, throughout the following decades a critique and consciousness of movement is indeed developed, with the best critique of the existential and political implications of such social form being Tiqqun’s text *Thesis on the Terrible Community* (2001), allegedly authored by an Italian member who would come to form artist collective Claire Fontaine.

theoretical insufficiencies, but is rather due to the emergence of “movement” as social form that follows historical and conceptual transformations within post-war class struggle. “The movement” as a form of politics that emerged from outside of politics itself.

## II. Spontaneity, invisibility, partiality

So far, I have traced an image of *autonomia* as the political and social expression of a relation between real subsumption, refusal, and antagonism that seeks to manifest through a tentative autonomy of use. What was specific to *autonomia*, vis-à-vis the other iterations of the workers’ movement, is explicit in how *operaismo* foresaw its emergence and understood its conditions of possibility. Even if the movement of *autonomia* comprised dozens of ideological identities, *operaismo* established the general categories which would account for its appearance.

As we’ve partially seen, *operaismo* advances a complex concept of class. For the PCI, the proletarian class was first and foremost a sociological category that devolved upon a depoliticized category of “people”. By contrast, Panzieri and the *Quaderni Rossi* saw class in terms of an immanent antagonism that was autonomous from the institutions of the workers’ movement, even if it sometimes expressed itself within them. The political element within class struggle was the class itself—not the party. Panzieri established the groundwork for *operaismo*’s later developments by distinguishing the political and economic instances within the class struggle: “Seen globally, as [capitalist development] improves the material situation of the working class and at the same worsens its political dependence on capital, working class struggles tend to assume the typical traits of a struggle that is more directly and immediately political.”<sup>13</sup>

Class answers the socialization of value in the opposite direction, transforming “this fictitious socialization into real socialization,”<sup>14</sup> a real socialization whose content cannot but be the “total and radical rupture of this unity [of despotism and rationality that is

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<sup>13</sup> Panzieri, Raniero. *La Ripresa del Marxismo Leninismo in Italia* (Rome: Nouve Edizione Operaie, 1977), 220.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

capitalism]<sup>15</sup>.” These struggles, “even when they start from traditional demands like wages, tend to assume two strongly united characteristics simultaneously: the affirmation of a living class collectivity that governs itself and a radical position against the system, a demand to overthrow [*rovesciare*]<sup>16</sup> the system.”<sup>17</sup>

Panzieri’s brief suggestion that class antagonism involves a self-governing community contrasts with the idea that a true proletarian sociality could only come about with the advent of a socialist state. Rather, as he says, “it is necessary to look to class struggles as a prefiguration of socialist society.”<sup>18</sup> Struggles are “directly and immediately political” inasmuch as they anticipate socialist forms, that is, inasmuch as socialism will have to embody the non-representational modes of organization being rehearsed on the shopfloors.

Prefiguration suggests a social reality, a social force that, even after the revolutionary leap, will be able to at least oppose all dangers of bureaucratic deviation and all dangers of capitalism’s survival in the construction of a planned society. The problem for the planned society is that of making global social planning and the social control of that planning coincide. Planning should not be understood as the extension of power from the offices and studios of the capitalist corporation to the whole productive process. (...) [it] should materialize, on all levels, the social command of productive processes by the association of free producers.<sup>19</sup>

Struggles rehearse, test, and develop the political means of enacting workers’ power. Workers develop their power by freely experimenting with the political possibilities of their association.

This means recognizing that the class’ action (...) is the only force capable of overthrowing capitalism’s processes of alienation in a way that is serious, radical and not susceptible of being reintegrated in the system. (...) It is not a question of emancipating labour, but of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>16</sup> *Rovesciare* can be translated either as inversion or as overthrowing.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 228.



suppressing it, not in the sense of the increase in free time, but as a category of capitalist work, as the process of the crystallization of labour, of the formation of fixed capital.<sup>20</sup>

Even if *operaismo* would later come into its own by developing this intuition against the ideas of shopfloor democracy and of socialism as “the association of free producers,” in Panzieri, the concept of class is already grounded in the sociality of struggle.

Panzieri’s inversion of the relation between party and class is a simple enough claim when read in this context, but its logic is significantly more complex. *Contra* PCI, Panzieri affirms that class is now capable of establishing political—and not only economic—goals on its own, without the guidance of professional militants. The inversion occurs when class uses the party, when it sets the strategic framework for the party’s tactics—supposing here that the opposite relation was already in effect.

Such is not always the case, however. The relation between party and class in orthodox Marxism is not one where the party instrumentalizes the proletariat, but rather one where the party fosters its political consciousness, leads and consolidates its political perspective, and establishes itself over the class as germ of its coming sovereignty. The orthodox understanding of the working-class views it as a sociological category whose prevalent condition is characterized by alienation, passivity and victimhood, which set the terms of its demands for respect, dignity and humanity.

In Panzieri’s tentative formulation, *operaismo* indeed shifts the value ascribed to these categories, but it establishes a fundamentally different relation between them. For him, class is autonomous, meaning it is capable of expressing itself consciously through demands that are strategically viable in the political arena. The position of the class within capitalist development is one of inherent antagonism and the class becomes ever more conscious of this fact. The party, on the contrary, is reduced to a mere tactical instrument of class struggle. This does not entirely negate its role or relevance, but it significantly alters it by divesting it of its intellectual, political and strategic privilege.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 231.

The constituent spontaneity presupposed in Panzieri's inversion does not merely invert the elements at play, it entails a decisive shift in the meaning of politics in the relation between class and party. For he does not merely invert the relation of leadership between the party and class but carries out a qualitative transformation that anticipates *autonomia* and its need for a concept of *movement* a decade later. However, the necessity to think this spontaneity beyond the factory and its political possibilities quickly ensued, well before *autonomia*. This became apparent in Alquati's inquiry into the lives of the *operai*, which fully unearthed how this inversion expressed itself politically.

Romano Alquati's inquiries into workers' daily lives and experiences revealed the metropolis to be more complex than the mere background scenery for the factory and its struggles. The idea of a "factory-city" and the social extension of the factory, which would come to ground a lot of Negri's work in the 70s, is nowhere clearer than in Alquati's particularly striking description of the 1962 Fiat strikes. These didn't kick off in Mirafiori (Fiat's main factory), but in the smaller companies that lived from Fiat's business. Alquati describes:

The first day of the national metal workers strike was carried out, in FIAT, by the 10'000 striking non-FIAT workers. (...) The FIAT workers crossed a striking Turin in the deserted trams. Other workers insulted them, throwing pieces of bread and small coins at them. At their section's entrance to the factory, they found workers from other factories who knew that their struggle could only be sorted by these 93,000 "sheep, and who were "sick of making them their breakfast."<sup>21</sup> From the early morning they were at the factory gates ready to insult the FIAT workers, holding no punches nor false expectations of solidarity from this "mass of sheep" (...) Then, in the evening, returning from work to their hamlets and residential suburbs, the FIAT workers found the workers who had spent the day striking. Groups were formed and discussions ensued. If there was a vanguard at FIAT, one that had been recomposed from the previous struggles, inside and outside FIAT, from the pressure of capital, it was this one who gained consciousness and strength during the first days of the strike, and was so pushed to face the problem of the general movement of the workers' struggle (...). It was this minority that, when it returned to the factory the next day, organized

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<sup>21</sup> "Stuffi di fare la pappa per loro" ("Tired of making their porridge for them")—implying their child-like behaviour.

the strike of the 7000,<sup>22</sup> and that broke FIAT's isolation during the moment of most intense class pressure since 1957."<sup>23</sup>

The spatial relations between struggles made evident how the planned metropolitan territory mediated production while also reorganizing the structures of solidarity and resistance. These structures of solidarity were means of organization that, as such, went qualitatively beyond the factory-based unions, following the autonomous element Panzieri had first grasped. Alquati saw the contradictions of the metropolitan territory come into their own when, looking at a later strike, he came to question the dynamics that were evident in the one before:

But when it is time to return to the factory, what will happen? (...) The necessity of taking this external organization inside [the factory] emerges. It's in the picketing, in the capacity to control the "scabs," the security guards, the leaders, that the need to fight capital inside becomes clear. To bring inside the factory the forms of connection, of solidarity, of initiative, of power and control that were exercised outside of it.<sup>24</sup>

Panzieri's spontaneous democratic shopfloor forms weren't based on the presupposed inherent socialism of the class. Rather, they spread into the factory from the forms of sociability emerging from within the productive metropolis. Two years later, in 1964, Mirafiori suffered a new series of wildcat strikes. Alquati defends these struggles while developing the following problematic:

Wildcat strikes are not an *anarchoid* form of protest, belonging to workers incapable of fighting collectively in organized forms; on the contrary, they demand a very high level of organization and cohesion. (...) And the first victory of these strikes is to have brought into broad daylight and to have demystified the recent history that sees a workers' organization developing within FIAT that is strong enough to carry out a strike of this kind: completely outside the historical and official institutions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Named after the 7000 workers who joined the strike.

<sup>23</sup> Alquati, Romano, "Note sulle Condizioni e lo Svolgimento dello sciopero alla Fiat" (1962) in Alquati, Romano. *Sulla Fiat* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), 173.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>25</sup> Alquati, Romano, "Lotta alla Fiat" (1964) in Alquati, Romano. *Sulla Fiat* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), 190.

Wildcat strikes were precisely what tactically materialized the emergent factory-centred forms of workers' solidarity and sociality, which were forged within the broader metropolis. Despite their apparent immediacy, wildcat struggles were more organized than union actions and their strength lay precisely in their appearance of immediacy:

What workers like in wildcat strikes is first of all the unpredictability: the unpredictability of its generalized turnover and outcome in time and space. The political scope of this type of workers' struggle is this: a) it requires "*an invisible organization*" that does not institutionalize itself as an autonomous organization within the capitalist productive process; b) it acts according to a continuous and *unpredictable* rotation of tactics, methods, times and sites of strike; c) *it doesn't demand anything*.<sup>26</sup>

Much like Tronti's "party of anarchy," the idea of an "invisible organization" thoroughly synthesizes *operaismo*'s political project. The idea of invisibility can be read in multiple ways. Alquati saw political socialization occurring both within and beyond the productive material and institutional infrastructure. As organization, socialization assigned roles, tactics, and movements through informal conjunctions; it dissolved the social roles enforced by the atomization of the productive process; and it eschewed the normative and institutional instances of mediation. This invisible organization thoroughly assumed the function of the party.

These forms of organization were invisible inasmuch as they took place beyond the institutional grid of mediation between capital and the workers' movement. Hence, they were ungraspable by traditional forms of classification. As an opaque sphere of socialization, the agency of this invisibility signals the existence of a field of social action that is neither public nor private. It does not comply with the forms of appearance of civil society nor with those of the private sphere of reproduction. Instead, it posits a sphere of partisanship made up of collective social relations that are relatively autonomous, that have politically defined borders, and that deploy their own differentiated structures of mediation accordingly.

"Unpredictability" comes not just from "spontaneity" nor simply from the illegibility of workers' invisible organising; it is also the effect of workers' tactical apprehension of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 192.

factory rhythms, from their capacity to organize a labour stoppage in a way that deals the most damage to the corporation. The wildcat strike is not simply a valorisation of the unstructured and erratic nature of revolt, but rather proceeds from the fact that the rank-and-file workers possess a superior tactical grasp of the battlefield. Likewise, the refusal to formulate demands, which Panzieri had already mentioned, has to be read *in situ*: demands are more suitable to be answered when timed right, and their strategic political weight is also contingent on the development of the relations of force between workers and the bosses.

For Alquati, this “invisible organization” is not, however, totally autonomous, nor are the wildcat strikes its only means of action. “Wildcat strikes do not exclude mass strikes nor demonstrations; these alternate, reciprocally, relaunching and empowering each other.”<sup>27</sup> This coordination between different moments of antagonism would translate into what Alquati saw as necessary articulation between invisible organization and public, political organization: “The task of a political organization is not to plan, in a predeterminate fashion, a wildcat strike, since that would run the risk of making it possible for the bosses to tame it: the political organization should instead contribute to its intensification.”<sup>28</sup> Tronti’s significant role within *operaismo* comes precisely from his capacity to develop the conceptual terms and questions of such intensification, which is also a tentative theory of the role of the *ceto politico* within proletarian autonomy from capital.

Tronti would systematize *operaismo*’s political intuitions into a full-blown revolutionary program. What is merely suggested in Alquati’s and Panzieri’s texts finds a concrete expression in Tronti’s openly provocative articles in which he aims to split the labour movement and constitute a new party capable of giving it revolutionary leadership. Tronti sees class struggle as a zero-sum game between opposing forces: “The relation between the two classes is such that whoever takes initiative wins.”<sup>29</sup> The workers’ viewpoint affirms lines of discontinuity and is capable of inverting the presumptions of bourgeois science:

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Tronti, *Operai e Capitale*, 7.

Bourgeois science embodies ideology just as capitalist production relations embody class struggle. From capital's viewpoint, ideology founded science: it founded it as a general social science. What was first a discourse about men, about the world of men, about society and the state, becomes, as the level of struggle grows, an objective mechanism in the functioning of the economic machine.<sup>30</sup>

Tronti affirms that proletarian epistemology must concern itself primarily with the concrete dimensions of class antagonism, and that any attempt to abstract from this conflict by means of universal social categories will necessarily further bourgeois ideology. The transition between immediate forms of perception—which in this case have capital's power as their object—and their conceptualization must begin from proletarian antagonism and remain faithful to it by expressing it in partial, or partisan—and not universal—terms. On the contrary, “the possibility and the capacity of synthesis remains entirely in workers' hands. (...) Synthesis today can only be unilateral, can only consciously be a class science.”<sup>31</sup>

On the one hand, this concept of partiality is an absolute refusal of any synthetic social category, whether it be popular, cultural, historical, or national. On the other hand, partiality is what makes class struggle possible, meaning that class can only exist as a set of antagonist measures. It is here that Tronti most adamantly sharpens his break with Panzieri. Panzieri saw struggles as autonomous inasmuch as they were capable of prefiguring socialism. For Tronti, on the contrary, class, and class struggles cannot be built around emergent social forms in struggle:

to base the model of a coming society on the analysis of the actual one is a bourgeois ideological vice that only oppressed plebs and vanguard intellectuals can truly reproduce: it is to place the band in front of the parade. (...) No worker fighting a boss ever asked: what about afterwards? The struggle against the boss is everything. The organization of this struggle is everything. But all of this is a world. We agree. It's the old world that we must overthrow. And who told you that it won't suffice to bring it down with the simple will to overthrow it, organized as a dominant class? (...) A long period of workers dictatorship over

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 12.

the entire society. This is the maximum future we wish to foresee. As an objective for struggle, it is enough. As an organization for struggle, it is usable. We do not wish to talk about anything else. The prophecies about a new world, about a new man, about the new human community, seem to us as dirty as the apology for a shameful past.<sup>32</sup>

Alquati's "invisible organization" became, in Tronti's articles, an epistemological principle rather than a practice that complemented the public efforts of the union. Emergent and "invisible" struggles weren't an affirmation of the proletariat's inherently democratic principles, but rather determined forms of negation whose power lay in refusing all synthetic determination within categories of inclusion in capital.

We've been told that in all of our proposals there is nothing universally human. It is true. There is truly nothing of the private bourgeois interests. Have you ever seen a proletarian struggle with a generically human platform of demands? There is nothing more limited and partial, nothing less universal in a bourgeois sense, than a factory struggle fought by workers against their direct boss.<sup>33</sup>

However, if struggles are to be partial then they must develop interior forms of mediation. If the political development of the class is to refuse all abstract categories, it nonetheless has to find forms for articulating its perceptions. The problem *operaismo* takes over from its contemporary social movements is the task of determining a non-institutionalized political power:

The capitalists have still not invented—and in fact, will obviously never be able to invent—a non-institutionalised political power. That type of political power is specific to the working class. The difference between the two classes at the level of political power is precisely this: the class of capitalists does not exist independently of the formal political institutions through which, in different but permanent ways, it exercises its domination.<sup>34</sup>

This question will ground the development of all later iterations of *operaismo*. For Tronti, these mediations were obviously grounded in the cohesive industrial world and of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 132

its territorial implementation. A new workers party, fully outside of representation, fully involved in becoming a non-institutionalized force, would deliver such power.

But what would become of this once the factory fully expanded into the metropolis and all tentative extra-parliamentary parties quickly reached their limits? Negri's works in the following decades would attempt to solve this question by developing the categories of spontaneity, invisibility, and partiality into systematic political tools.

### III. Negri and the *movimento*

In the previous chapter, I showed how Negri redeployed *operaismo*'s political categories so as to provide a conceptual framework for *Autonomia* and its forms of struggle. Such struggles simultaneously hinged on the attempts to decompose capital's forms of power and on the need to develop autonomous institutions capable of strengthening this impetus. It was imperative for Negri that both moments coincide, lest the workers' movement fall prey once again to institutionalization. His program for *operaismo* as such sought to establish a form of power that never solidifies as such, one that avoids institutionalization through its movement and openness and which is also capable of determining its own internal mediations through its political elite, its meta-vanguard, its *ceto politico*.

Negri's effort to turn the antagonistic anthropology of the class into a concept of an autonomous political power, a "non-institutional political power" as Tronti claims above, is carried out through his reading of Lenin. In one of *Potere Operaio*'s first issues, an unsigned article, first thought to be written by *autonomia* militant Franco Piperno and only recently attributed to Negri<sup>35</sup>, claimed that a return to Lenin was necessary: "*Cominciamo a dire Lenin*" ("To begin saying Lenin"). Negri's claim clashed with *operaismo*'s councilist factions, where the political primacy of workers meant rejecting any kind of vanguard that would substitute itself for the class's political initiative.

Negri, however, would try to answer the questions concerning organization which had surfaced during the late 60s in the seminars on Lenin that he prepared in 1972 and

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<sup>35</sup> Marco Scavino, *Potere Operaio* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2018), 135.



1973. These were published later in 1977, and presumably reviewed before publication to fit Negri's late 70s concerns, which had changed substantially during the decade. Nevertheless, their initial preparation took place during the years when *operaismo's* political legacy faced the question of the organizational form that it should assume after the crisis of the extra-parliamentary formations of *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua*, and thus before the formation of organized *Autonomia*<sup>36</sup> in 1973.

Negri looked to Lenin's revolutionary method for the touchstone that would be capable of identifying the theoretical and organizational elements in the autonomous struggles that possessed true insurrectionary power. Negri justifies his reading on the basis of the discontinuities inherent to Marxian thought, most proximately that of Tronti's "Copernican turn" and with its break with PCI's Marxism:

One of the fundamental characteristics of a Marxist discourse on Marxism is the assumption of a necessary discontinuity, and of that discontinuity as its reality check. Only as ideology could Marxist thought present itself as having a fictitious internal continuity (...). The continuity it assumes cannot be other than the one—contradictory and dynamic—of the revolutionary subject it refers to. Marxism is the real continuity of a subject that proposes the subversive moment as the real continuity of its being: only under these circumstances does theory become material power.<sup>37</sup>

The proper Marxist method would then seek its basis in the continuity of the revolutionary subject within an always changing relationship of antagonism.<sup>38</sup> This discontinuous materialism was the method of Lenin's thought, which "interprets, (...) within the determinate relation of class that extends from an historical subject—the Russian proletariat—to the global capitalist power structure it has before it, all of the

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<sup>36</sup> The post-'68 period saw the membership of the extra-parliamentary organizations dwindle. A substantial part of factory workers reentered unions and the women's movement critique of the persistence of sexism within the movement's institutions started to create their first fissures. It wasn't until 1973 that autonomous factory struggles gained a new impetus, overcoming the need for the array of small parties and collectives. Organized *Autonomia* is formed after the dissolution of *Potere Operaio* in that same year.

<sup>37</sup> Antonio Negri, *La Fabbrica della Strategia: 33 Lezioni su Lenin* (Milan: Libri Rossi, 1977), 9.

<sup>38</sup> This separation between the discontinuity of social forms and the invariance of antagonism is once again an attempt to define potentiality as pure, non-determined, antagonism.

problems that the global proletariat proposes itself, in that moment, in that phase.”<sup>39</sup> In Lenin, Negri finds the instruments for the theory of the tendency he had developed in his reading of the *Grundrisse*. Here, the struggles of the Russian proletariat appear as the most intense point of universal class relations and hence determine their development. The parallel hinted at is obvious: As Russia had spearheaded the communist movement in the 1910s, so would Italy in the 1970s.

Negri maintains that Lenin’s thought is above all the embodiment of the continuity of the antagonistic subject. Such continuity stands against the position that the “spontaneity” of autonomous workers’ struggles is opposed to Lenin’s idea of organization: “the continuity of a subversive subject must come to terms with the discontinuity of the determinations of the subject, with the variance of the dialectical forms it assumes.”<sup>40</sup> While class assumes manifold forms, its essence is always one of antagonism, an antagonism that serves as the criterion of the Trontian distinction between class and labour-power. The Leninist manoeuvre consists of bridging the shifting gap between class antagonism and its forms of appearance by deriving new forms of organization from changes in class antagonism. In this sense, class is always already in movement, in that it surfaces as the subversive exception to the dialectical unfolding of its forms of (capitalist) appearance.

Class stands outside of capital in the same measure as it is capable of exercising a revolutionary thrust—but in the same precise way, capital attempts to retake it inside, to once again reduce it to labour-force, to once again understand it as an organized working class, making it function inside its productive process, accommodating its demands but restructuring the system of exploitation in such a way that those demands are included and become an element of development as much as they initially were elements of rupture. (...) We call that relationship the *technical and/or political composition* of the working class. For each historical phase of class struggle we define a type of working class composition that comprises, in its interior, not just the arrangement of the global productive process, but also the set of the experiences of struggle, of behaviours, the way the determinant and vital needs are renewed and redefined in an always new fashion (...) the entire history of capital,

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<sup>39</sup> Negri, *La Fabbrica Della Strategia*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 12.

becomes, from this point of view, the history of class struggles and of the diverse political class compositions, and this shows in detail the history of capital as its effect<sup>41</sup>.

Through this method of grasping the political composition of the class, Negri builds a dialectal framework where class assumed increasingly anti-systemic and anti-representational forms, inasmuch as the figure of the mass-worker, the modern unskilled and deterritorialized factory worker, helped form the tendency, the most acute moment of class struggle, capable of determining all others:

If the need to develop moments of vanguard in the organizational composition of the mass-worker (...) is at the centre of any theoretical and organizational interest, then it is because this interest grips the urgency of an action that captures the state's reaction as it develops and strikes against it as a vanguard function. But this vanguard is something fundamentally different than what is foreseen in Leninist theory: its foundation and potentiality are not sociologically insulated, because this vanguard does not confront the whole 'people', nor does it regard the planning-state and command over production with hope. On the contrary, [this vanguard], from the unity of abstract social labour, looks at capitalist violence and its capacity for the destruction of this same unity (...): today the question is not that of establishing diverse degrees of consciousness and of objective force within the subject that pushes the revolutionary process forward, but that of moving along the internal lines of the process of capitalist decomposition and of identifying within that same process the movement's traction and direction (...) The only worthy struggles are those capable of focusing on, and destroying, the relations of violence that capital exercises as a function of that same value mechanism<sup>42</sup>

Tronti's partiality and partisanship, his opposition to the category of "people," determines a substantially different role for the vanguard, where it no longer functions as an instrument of consciousness, but rather as a tactic for decomposing command—a decomposition that the class was already undertaking by itself.

Within this framework, Panzieri's analysis of the spontaneity of struggles starts to be less a compliment of workers' allegedly democratic instincts, but, on the contrary, a vanguard element of the decomposition of capitals' factory command. Negri takes

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 14.

Panzieri's intuition a bit further, assuming such spontaneity as fundamental to any sort of revolutionary program.

[I]t is the function of the masses and its mighty wave of spontaneity to impose the dialectical passage to organization. The image of this formidable billow, of this impetuous growth of spontaneous struggles, mirrors the argumentative mechanism of the spontaneists, but it overwhelms them, because it is here (...) that the Leninist decision to impose the passage to organization springs forth. Organization is the verification/confirmation of spontaneity, its refinement (...). Reality is dialectic, spontaneity is the dialectical base of the passage to organization (...) The fact is that the material reference for the movement—the spontaneity scientifically observable by the workers' science of program and tactics—is more important, it logically comes before the question of organization<sup>43</sup>.

Within the concept of class composition there is the attempt to unearth tactics out of critique, to move from a “theory of capital” to a “theory of organization.” Lenin does this through the concept of “determinate social formation:” “The skeleton of capital is not the critical analysis of the economic theory of capital, but rather the social relation unearthed by this theory, in the relation that, in the determinate social formation, is constituted between productive social forces, which defines the global dialectical fabric within which the workers' partisan viewpoint is formed.”<sup>44</sup> Negri's method of the tendency, as previously mentioned, is grounded in Lenin's concept of “determined abstraction,”<sup>45</sup> the capacity to grasp a social formation:

[the concept] can be defined as the capacity to grasp the highest moment of development of class struggle, and, as such, of the development of capital, of removing it from the immediate determination to which it is fixed, and to assume instead the abstract concept in terms of necessary tendency of the process. This procedure inverts the current sense of determinations such as “abstract” and “concrete”: what seems more abstract (capitalist development in an underdeveloped society) becomes within the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 18.

tendency the most concrete thing, and what is concrete and immediate is removed from the situation. True concrete is not the immediate but the set of all real determinations.<sup>46</sup>

Determined abstraction, then, is the capacity to identify in every historical determination of class struggle, in every determinate social formation, the most developed element that, as such, becomes the model for every other capitalist social formation, the model of the capitalist totality.

Negri derives from Lenin not so much an organizational form as an organizational method: class struggle as civil war and spontaneity as the emergence of “invisible organizations” within a fragmented territory. Here, a determinate social formation presupposes the materialization of class struggle within the most intense point of conflict. The continuous shifts in Negri’s positions over the following decades can be referred back to this equation, even if it can be argued that the equation itself is always already heading towards its self-dissolution. In fact, as it will become clear over the course of this chapter, the organizational hypothesis chosen by organized *Autonomia* did in fact always seem to be one step ahead of the institutional left and one step behind the development of struggles themselves. Negri’s tentative party of *Autonomia*, to be discussed below, attempted to capture an always fleeting collective process of decomposition. Class struggle is civil war indeed, but one which never really truly coalesces through the new institutions that organized *Autonomia* sought to build.

Negri’s Leninism rightly rescues Lenin as method rather than as orthodoxy, but in so doing, Negri bases his method on a theory of continuous ruptures and restarts. The answer to the lingering and aporetic question of how a political movement can be truly emancipatory without ever coalescing into a new sovereign power is sought in discontinuity: movements never crystallize into sovereignty because they always start anew. For instance, *Quaderni Rossi* splits into *Classe Operaia*; *Classe operaia* ends when *Potere Operaio* emerges; *Potere Operaio* ends claiming that “To start over isn’t to turn backwards,”<sup>47</sup> and so on. The self-dissolution and reconstitution of groups and political

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “*Ricominciare da capo non significa tornare indietro*” was the title of the final issue of *Potere Operaio*’s magazine. The magazine’s cover, solid red with a white ripped cut throughout, clearly evoked Lucio Fontana’s ripped canvas paintings.

identities can prove to be a sound strategy if one views them as instruments of struggle, but this can also risk avoiding the more complex tasks at hand. In the decades that followed, Negri repeatedly attempted to systematize this inconstancy, without ever realizing that indeterminacy and inconsistency are quite different things, as we will come to see.

Whereas most post-'68 political groups had tried to build their force through the "organic growth" of their structures, the identification of new pockets of dissent and dissatisfaction, and the cooption of militants, Negri viewed communism as an idea that was always on the verge of bursting through the seams. For Negri, communism's emergence was not a question of class consciousness (whether true or false), but rather of its power to break the commanding, negative power of capital. Insurrection takes precedence over organization because it is necessary to first negate the negativity of capital's command structures if the class is to truly discover its own forms of organization. Whereas orthodox Marxism saw crisis as the immanent collapse of a contradictory system, and hence as a historical process to be ambiguously both followed and conducted, here crisis represents the moment where the latent antagonism emerges as an unavoidable fact that implies the reorganization of the production process.

As such, the vanguardist "party of insurrection"<sup>48</sup> would be the proletarian institution capable of fostering the rupture in command necessary for the question of organization to truly emerge.<sup>49</sup>

It is around this vanguard that the whole proletariat comes together in an identity of interests that cries out for an interpreter, in a unity of goals that cries out for direction and with a cargo of anti-capitalist violence that cries out for a detonator. (...) The workers of the large factories, at the cutting edge of social class unification, display an absolutely hegemonic political and theoretical configuration within the current class composition. (...) But the theoretical figure that the workers of large factories express is even more important. They show how productive labor, that is, labour producing surplus-value, is not only annulled in its quality of exploitation rendered to the boss. Productive labor must also be freed. It can

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<sup>48</sup> *Potere Operaio's* slogan, featured in its hymn, "*A las barricadas*," is a version of the Spanish civil war song that was itself an adaptation of a Polish revolutionary song.

<sup>49</sup> Negri, *I libri del rogo*. 43.

appear and emerge as creativity and freedom. The infinite fantasy of liberated productive labour is revealed in the struggles, from sabotage to mass strikes, from street-fighting to armed struggle. Here the workers of the large factories recompose their vanguard political task into the theoretical task of liberation.<sup>50</sup>

Inasmuch as communism remained bound to “the infinite fantasy of liberated productive labour” it was also dependent on a vanguard to bring it to fruition. And just as *operaismo* first posited the inversion of class and party by claiming that the class itself was now capable of formulating its own demands without the need of an external vanguard, it then had to reconstruct a vanguard in the relation between the class and the movement. Here, the faction of the class that first embodied its autonomy became the political element that shaped and conducted the movement. In other words, by virtue of its force, it became a party again, and, as a party, it once again had to choose between armed struggle or mediation.<sup>51</sup>

The party must reveal in the given class unity the recomposition that has taken place within the proletariat, from within and below, not from outside and above. The insurrectionary art of the party is maieutic, it is the capacity to oppose the burden of the bosses' irrational command with equal intensity but in reverse. Just as capital's command in the moment of valorization uses the whole social connectedness of productive labour, so the party tears the totality of productive labour away from capitalist command by attacking and destroying the moment of valorization. The moment class presents itself in its objectivity and autonomy as an obstacle to the recovery of profit—and within this autonomy it discovers the world of its own needs, communism and appropriation—the moment class presents itself not so much as an independent variable but as a determinate blockage, the task of the party is increasingly to break the mystified image that the bosses' power forces upon the class. The selection of tasks, of timing, of objectives is up to the class, and it is up to the strength of the party to break capitalist command. This is how the process of subordination of all the institutional forms of power to the class comes to completion: the party ceases to have the function of representation and divests itself of this last residue of capitalist necessity.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>51</sup> And, as such, once the armed hypothesis failed in the 1970s, Negri started to develop the other one.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 89.

By conceptualizing autonomous struggles as the self-valorization of the class (as discussed in Chapter II), Negri presupposes that their hypostatization, beyond a general and diffuse form, is dependent on institutions capable of actualizing such content of struggle. As we've seen, Negri warns that in the absence of a party, proletarian self-valorization would either turn into reformism (by falling prey to institutional mediation) or terrorism, a blind voluntarism incapable of deploying a social strategy. While Negri was partially right—those were the risks—they were so inasmuch as the savage diversity of the movement was reduced to such an abstract conceptual framework of self-valorization (or any other similar formulation of “liberated labour”), which in itself was inherently “reformist” and “voluntarist.” The accusation of “reformism”, as opposed to “revolutionary”, seems off-place, inasmuch as one of the early *operaismo* tropes was how reformist demands could be pushed to conquer tactical spaces necessary for the construction of workers' power, hence problematizing any immediate separation between such concepts, but Negri's concern is justified inasmuch as it is deeply grounded on his own concept of self-valorization, discussed in the previous chapter.

Negri's self-valorization aims to move from the aforementioned “autonomy *from*” toward an “autonomy *to*.” Negri subsumes the negativity of refusal under the autonomy of self-valorization *qua* insurrectionary party that aims to command its every development, inscribing them both in the very same teleology that he refused. It is only because Negri defines the essence of autonomy in terms of self-valorization that he is constrained to define the aporia of *autonomia* in terms of “reformism” and “voluntarism.” In other words, this division is only valid inasmuch as one views revolution as the transition of an institutional power, rather than its abolition. The need for a party to mediate between reformism and terrorism comes for the need for a conceptual/tactical instrument to mediate between these expressions of self-valorization, because the concept of self-valorization itself forces such an outcome. I will thoroughly address this further in the following chapter.

The surprising intensity and power of those struggles, their capacity to go beyond social integration, institutional control, and state repression, raised the question of their own inner organization, and, hence, the question of their own self-perception. As we've seen, Negri emerged as the figure capable of synthesizing these problems in a thorough, dynamic and sharp conceptualization, which nevertheless also sought to justify



proposing a leadership for the movement—if not as a formal hierarchy, then by means of charisma and theory.

However, the conceptual framework that Negri built around the problematic of the movement continues the same tension between the social phenomenon of the refusal of labour and the concept of self-valorization. The antagonistic refusal of labour in the movement is indeed subversive in that it blocks particular moments within the social, economic, and political reproduction of capital. However, whenever these concrete phenomena are abstractly theorized, what is novel about them is lost and the theorist ends up reproducing or merely mirroring old categories. This does not mean that one cannot theorize these phenomena, however. While Negri is right in systematizing *operaismo*'s political insights—spontaneity, invisibility, partiality—into a form that is tendentially autonomous from institutions, the reality of the area of *autonomia* itself (the movement) was richer and more complex than Negri's theory of self-valorization and the party would allow.

On the one hand, the movement was a destituent force<sup>53</sup> that aimed to break the structure and network of capital's command, that aimed to rupture the dialectic of valorization, and that did so without positing any formal alternative, as any "alternative" would simply reinforce a previously existing structure. On the other hand, in order to endure over time, the movement had to take on certain constituent forms and tendencies,<sup>54</sup> which generally sought to sustain and organize the movement's destituent potentiality.

*Autonomia*, as a movement, was stuck between exile (dropping out) and militarization, between refusal and productivity. *Autonomia* rejected all attempts of organization and those attempts consequently found themselves obliged to choose between mediation (the *ceto politico*) or militarization<sup>55</sup>. This was the movement's political limit, the question it couldn't solve. On the one hand, the military and the

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<sup>53</sup> Destituent as opposed to constituent, meaning, a force that does not uphold new forms of power *in lieu* of those abolished. I will thoroughly discuss this concept in the following chapter.

<sup>54</sup> I will address the tension between these concepts in the next chapter.

<sup>55</sup> I will thoroughly discuss the relation between *autonomia*, armed struggle and violence in the following chapter.

communal, the exile and the political, have to be held together, have to be categorically undistinguishable. On the other hand, in order to gain political purchase, to constitute a politics, such elements would have to delve into the same abstractness of political mediation from which the movement sought to break away. To state this is not to assume the point of view of an aporetic riddle, rather, it is to interrogate what other political, social, and existential forms could have been inferred from *Autonomia*.

The mediations came within the form of a *ceto politico*, a political elite, both in a conceptual and a concrete sense. Conceptually, this elite established itself through its own theoretical practice of advocating for a party of *autonomia* that it would conceptually establish. Concretely, this elite historically arose in the constitution of an “organized *Autonomia*,” a network of specialized cadre that, despite its informality, attempted to form a vanguard in the area of *autonomia*. Even if “class” itself was now vanguard, inasmuch as it was distinct from the labour-force, its self-perception became contingent on its own inner vanguard.

#### IV. Movement

To properly grasp the historical significance of the movement of *autonomia* vis-à-vis a general problematic of the concept of movement it is necessary to address how, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept acquires antagonistic overtones against those which express the dynamics of civil society or participatory politics. The concept of movement appears throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France, where it denoted the political forms opposed to the static elements of the sovereign state and the dynamic primacy of society over juridical and state institutions. It is also associated with the appearance of artistic and youth movements and, of course, with the labour movement—for instance, *Arbeit bewegung* in Marx. It wasn't until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, that this opposition found itself redefined as antagonistic to parliamentary forms. Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt discuss this antagonism in a way that radically differs from *operaismo*, but the contrast is nevertheless illuminating.

Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973) defines “movement” as a reactionary answer to the contemporary fragmentation of political life, mixing an aristocratic distrust of bourgeois political forms with proletarian resentment of the social-

democrat compromise. Movements, whether left or right, sought to rediscover a sense of the dynamic social unity that was lost in the rise of contemporary democracies and their cumbersome, structural inefficiency. This fragmentation involved the atomization of the two-party system, within which different social groups shared political power, or had at least had that in their prospects:

The obvious advantage of this system is that there is no essential difference between government and state, that power and state remain within the grasp of the citizens organized in the party (...) and that consequently there is no occasion for indulgence in lofty speculations about Power and State as though they were something beyond human reach, metaphysical entities independent of the will and action of the citizens.<sup>56</sup>

Movement, then, implies the emergence of a social form that is not representable, not conducive to any presupposed forms of participation. The irruption of movements can be read, on the one hand, through a rigidification of the political system, which increasingly diminishes its scope of representation, and, on the other hand, through the emergence of forces beyond such participation.

In a seminal *autonomia* text, *The Tribe of Moles*<sup>57</sup> (1977), Sergio Bologna addresses the relation between representation and movement by drawing a short history of the “party system.” In Italy, Bologna claims, such a system of representation derives from the post-war compromise to prevent a workers’ hegemony from taking power by implementing policies that would foster a new middle class. The middle class that arose assumed a relative autonomy from the state *qua* civil society and wasn’t entirely hostile to the workers’ cause. However, the workers’ offensives all throughout the 60s, along with the 1973 oil crisis, would thwart the aims of creating a middle class, causing the political regime to “no longer aim to represent conflicts, nor to mediate or organize them: it delegates them to ‘economic interests’ and poses itself as the specific form of the state, separate from and hostile to movements in society, more frantically counterposed

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<sup>56</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 252.

<sup>57</sup> Bologna, Sergio. *The Tribe of Moles* (1977), ed. Ed Emery (libcom.org, July 23, 2005), [libcom.org/files/Sergio%20Bologna-%20The%20Tribe%20of%20Moles.pdf](http://libcom.org/files/Sergio%20Bologna-%20The%20Tribe%20of%20Moles.pdf).

to civil society. The party system no longer ‘receives’ the thrusts from the base; it controls and represses them.”<sup>58</sup>

Movements, then, don’t stem from the degeneracy of representation, but from inability of the state and civil society to curtail the primacy of the proletarian class and its pursuit of class hegemony. It is the state’s rigid systematization of participation that forces the emergence of informal and invisible social forms, which then engage the state in an antagonistic relation: “The larger the political space conquered by the extra institutional movements, and the wider the cultural territory and the system of values and behaviours that these impose on decisive sections of the class, the more the form of the state as ‘party system’ becomes increasingly open and aggressive.”<sup>59</sup>

The elusive informality of movements is at every turn a strategic answer to the forms the state assumes when faced with class antagonism. Arendt’s account of how political leaders outside of the two-party system<sup>60</sup> pursue partial goals rather than a cohesive public perspective fails to consider how this “public perspective” is a reified power structure or how these “partial” movements actually express not only social and political contradictions but the very process through which a power structure dissolves itself. As we’ve seen above, it is through this partiality that Mario Tronti developed his conception of a workers’ power.

For Arendt, 20th century totalitarianisms develop the originally pan-Germanic movement’s idea of abolishing the state (or its form) rather than seizing it: “[Italian Fascism] wanted a Fascist state and a Fascist army, but still an army and a state; only in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia army and state became subordinated functions of the movement.”<sup>61</sup> Within the movement, the state is reduced from mediation to accessory, that is, to a means for increasing the movement’s power and partisanship against the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>60</sup> Up until the fragmentation of the DC and the PCI in the ‘90s, Italy was indeed a two-party system. However, power didn’t rotate between the two parties, even if multiple compromises were made throughout the state’s infrastructure. The margins of the working class that fell outside the social framework of the “historical compromise” pressured the terms of this arrangement.

<sup>61</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 259.

power that holds society together. Here, to abolish the state does not mean to abolish the form of sovereign power, but to separate such sovereign power from its expression as mediation.

Unknowingly, Arendt identifies some of the essential aspects that later movements would assume after 1968. Movements do not position themselves against the state in an anarchist form, rather they place themselves outside of the command, the bureaucracy, and the program of the state, as exceptional. Arendt sees the unwillingness of movements to express this exception in the form of a program as a weakness that they turn to their advantage:

The pan-movements made a virtue of this shortcoming by transforming parties into movements and by discovering that form of organization which, in contrast to all others, would never need a goal or a program but could change its policy from day to day without harm to its membership. Long before Nazism proudly pronounced that though it had a program it did not need one, Pan-Germanism discovered how much more important for mass appeal a general mood was than laid-down outlines and platforms. For the only thing that counts in a movement is precisely that it keeps itself in constant movement<sup>62</sup>.

What Arendt identifies as blatant political opportunism and orchestration is in fact an essential trait of the capacity of movements to oppose the state. Tronti refers to the absence of a program as a proletarian strategy, claiming, in *Operai e Capitale*, that workers' demands should increasingly merge into a singular instance of refusal.

At first glance, *autonomia*'s absence of a program mirrors Arendt's analysis, as the movement openly claimed that struggles themselves would determine the institutions that followed upon their insurrections, hence abandoning anything resembling a program. Arendt accuses the lack of program as opportunist but *autonomia* posited this absence as a condition of non-mediation. However, what this programmatic void reveals, across the political spectrum, is that the movement form takes its very existence both as program and as exception. However, programs become dispensable when the political object is not outside the movement, but coincides with the affirmation of the collective

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 260

body of the movement itself. Any stageist program is eschewed, since it cannot but impose degrees of separation in between the political community and its agency.

*Operaismo*, through and through, unashamedly returns to a critical legacy whose attack on the liberal state was all but communist. Tronti, and Negri, for example, albeit to differing degrees, embrace the thinkers of the “conservative revolution” – Junger, Schmitt, Nietzsche, and so on – in an effort to further distance themselves from a perceived “official” history of the worker’s movement embodied in the PCI. Tronti justifies this through the claim that one must use every strong thought, even if it belongs to the enemy, but the trick isn’t merely rhetorical or an attempt to *épater la bourgeoisie [rouge]*, on the contrary, *operaismo*’s and *autonomia*’s thought on the form of political action, embodied in the informal concept of the movement, is openly at odds with the “left,” here viewed as distinct from communism.

The question of the *ceto politico* and of the movement as vanguard is developed in Carl Schmitt's 1933 article "State, Movement, People." Schmitt's text was published immediately after the rise of the German national-socialist party. Its primary objective was to justify both the juridical legitimacy of the new regime and its originality regarding the previous Weimar constitution. Schmitt's conceptualization of a new tripartite structure of the political unity of the *Reich* sought to illustrate this rupture, while aiming to establish basic principles for the political action of the *Reich*.

Schmitt sees state, movement, and people as distinct yet interdependent elements. The state comprises the governmental apparatus and its infrastructure. The people are the *impolitical* mass element, that is, the collective agent whose political passions were nullified by the liberal state. Movement is the political element that stands above and below these two, grounding and conducting their development: politics is no longer limited to the inner workings of the state but rather finds its source in exterior elements: "today you can't determine politics from the state, rather, it is necessary to determine the state from politics."<sup>63</sup> In Schmitt's terms, as the political element, the movement has the capacity to establish the unity of the political body. It does so by establishing a political direction that answers only to itself, not by standing above the

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<sup>63</sup> Carl Schmitt, *State, Movement, People* (1933), trans., Simona Draghici (Corvalls: Plutarch Press, 2001).

law, but by taking itself to be the core of the law. Schmitt sees the movement's exceptionality as the guarantee of national unity. While it took up a different relation to the nation state, *operaismo*'s framework presupposed a similar distinction to the one between people and movement, namely, the Trontian difference between labour-force and class, where the first is but a depoliticized cogwheel and the other is precisely the element capable of rupturing the abstract command of capital. Likewise, *autonomia* established itself as the normative coherence of struggles (as seen in *Paz!* and *Insurrezione*) and, simultaneously, understood itself as the coincidence of means and ends, that is, as both the transition to communism and communism itself.

For Schmitt, the independent legitimacy of the movement is what gives it autonomy vis-à-vis the state (and the people). Schmitt bases his argument for the exceptionality and leadership of the *Führer*'s on the claim that he is one with the people. What defines political unity is the existence of a juridical totality where the community's "natural" behaviors can expect fair legal treatment because legal precepts arise from the community's ethno-linguistic union. The *Reich*'s creation of this political unity makes its guidance indistinguishable from the organic nature of the people—something Schmitt calls the "Species equality" between the guide and the people. Law disappears into a naturalized, organic social relation. This is the totalitarian dimension of movements that so concerned Arendt—it is a partiality that takes over the sovereign totality and becomes an apparatus of differential inclusion and exclusion, a theme that will feature heavily in Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series.

At the heart of Schmitt's concern to affirm the necessary unity of the state and its people is not only the conservative trope of the dissolution of the nation. Schmitt saw the liberal state as antagonistic toward the figures of the state and the individual, despite the fact that the state's juridical infrastructure was built to protect the individual from the excesses of state power. In this juridical *status quo*, the state had no possibility of legally framing the gregarious associations formed within the spheres of sociality, such as the "invisible organizations" that were neither public nor private, and which, more often than not, assumed class identities. In other words, the state had no way of immunizing itself against *movements* arising outside itself and beneath the public realm of civil society. Schmitt's negative appreciation of this burgeoning autonomy vis-à-vis the state nevertheless recognizes the potential of movements to introduce an element of the

political within the modern liberal state. The political leadership of the national socialist party over the state and the people sought to subsume this emerging political element under its command, putting it at the head of the state, extirpated of its contradictory elements. Here, Schmitt establishes a double nature of the concept of movement that mirrors the antinomies of *Autonomia*: on the one hand, the movement threatens the unity of the state, on the other, to prevent fragmentation, a particular form of movement should be elevated to a sovereign principle.

Schmitt's account of the emergence of a political arena that is neither public nor private – that falls out of the dimensions of the state and the citizen – and that as such situates itself outside of the juridical edifice, obviously befits the type of political phenomena evident during the 70s in Italy, but Schmitt fails to recognize that hostility to the state is by itself capable of positing a neither private nor public social element, that isn't a part of the state or of civil society, precisely as a weapon against and outside the state, that this antagonism has agency in the political materialization of a social sphere autonomous of the state's legal determinations.

However, a movement's legitimization always rests upon a self-perceived unity. This unity may assume the authoritarian forms of the national-socialist party or the decentered and rhizomatic forms of the post-'68 movements. But at its core, a movement always implicitly rests upon an idea of autonomy that attempts to make do without mediating structures other than its own.

Giorgio Agamben would later comment on Schmitt's article in a presentation that aimed to challenge post-*operaismo*'s use of the concept of movement. His reading of Schmitt sees movement as becoming possible only within the demise of the political body, when this collective agent can no longer be deemed political: "The concept of movement presupposes the eclipse of the democratic notion of people as constitutive political body."<sup>64</sup> Schmitt understands the political capacity of movement only on the basis of a political body that has been reduced to a biopolitical population. Movement always surfaces as articulated with the depoliticized body—as exile, as reaction, as leverage, etc. *Operaismo*'s separation between class and labour-force would strongly

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<sup>64</sup> Agamben, Giorgio "Movement" (2005), in [quepuedeuncuerpo.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/movement\\_giorgio\\_agamben.pdf](http://quepuedeuncuerpo.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/movement_giorgio_agamben.pdf) (31-1-2018).



embody this distinction, precisely over the question of the organization of its political cadre. The proletarian class can only become the vanguard if it is a partisan, or partial category, not the class whose interests are universal. *Operaismo* understands this from the beginning and rightly posits class as non-universal partisanship, but in doing so it merely pushes the problem further: the question of the political form of such partisanship remains open. Agamben's response to this problem is far too cryptic: "when movement exists, one should act as if it doesn't; when movement doesn't exist, one should act as if it does." The reasoning behind these words will become evident in Chapter V.

What Schmitt (nor Agamben, in this text at least) grasp is that movement's separation from totality does not necessarily imply an attempt of instrumental articulation. What comes to the fore here is that there is always a tension between a movement's destituent and constituent aspects, a tension that became quite explicit in *Autonomia*.

Arendt's and Schmitt's understanding of movement severely contrast with Negri's, even if they point to the same structure. Thus, even in the context of *operaismo*, their concepts of movement allow us to further understand the autonomous character of movements as problematic in itself: they allow to see how the *ceto politico* was not an immanent expression of the movement, but an attempt on behalf of a part of the movement to transcend itself. To progress further than this it is necessary to choose another route within the area of *autonomia*.

## **V.      *Movimento and Gemeinwesen***

Negri's argument for an end to the law of value is very similar to another that was being thought at this time, namely, by Jacques Camatte, who arrived at radically different conclusions. Camatte was part of Amadeo Bordiga's post-PCI Internationalist Communist Party, and broke with orthodox Marxism from the late 60s onwards. Like Negri, Camatte saw capitalism assuming a despotic character, but not exclusively through political rule or through the disciplinary measures of the metropolis. Rather, Camatte, like Debord and others, critiqued the commodity fetishism that ruled over the totality of social relations by means of "false-consciousness" and "fictitious capital." All expressions of social life and

subjectivity, including the phenomena of the movement, could be seen as expressions of such false consciousness. The political forms which had emerged from '68 in Italy—the *partitini*, the collectives, the political-ideological groups—would be nothing but expressions of despair and alienation, functioning more like “rackets” rather than revolutionary movements.<sup>65</sup>

Unlike Negri, who saw class autonomy emerging in the crisis opened by the end of the law of value, Camatte viewed this collapse as the workers' movement having run its course: once capital became “fictitious,” decoupled from any real measure of value, so did the social relations develop within the capitalist mode of production. The development of the productive forces once bound the proletariat to the possibility of emancipation. Inasmuch as society reproduced itself through the social understanding of wealth as value, which had its origin in abstract labour, workers had a world to gain, a world that they themselves produced. Once capital, not class, autonomized from such relation, then the progress of class to power and emancipation was forever stalled.

In “The Wandering of Humanity” (1973), published in the *Invariance* journal,<sup>66</sup> Camatte shows how real subsumption constitutes an anthropological transformation at the level of the species<sup>67</sup>. The “real domination of capital over society” is accomplished when gold, or any other material representation of capital, loses its status as general equivalent. Capitalist expansion loses all inhibitions, fully embracing the “ideal representation” that enables it to dominate all of society: “Capitalized human activity becomes the standard of capital, until even this dependence on value and its law begins to disappear completely. This presupposes the integration of human beings in the

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<sup>65</sup> See “De l’organisation” in *Invariance*, year V, issue 2.

<sup>66</sup> Camatte, “Errance de l’humanité” in *Invariance*, série II, n° 3, 1973.

<sup>67</sup> Although both Negri and Camatte use the term subsumption as a totalization of capital, and come from neighboring political *milieus*, their interpretation of its consequences would wildly differ. Whereas for Camatte, as explained above, subsumption is a catastrophic collapse of an essential ontology, a withering of “humanity”, for Negri it is almost the opposite. Subsumption, even in all its violence, is but capital retreating into an autonomous logic encircled on all sides by proletarian struggles ready to appropriate what they can from the ruins of the historical experience of capitalism. These are inverted ontologies, that however have mirroring concepts at their core: a similar understanding of an essential vitalism that subsumption either fully captures or fully frees.

process of capital and the integration of capital in the minds of human beings.”<sup>68</sup> The “human” community, determined by its species-being, by its relation of use and subjectivation with and within nature, is eclipsed through the creation of capital’s “material community,” where the species is wholly determined by its metabolic relation to valorization.

This implies a “domestication” of *species-being* that disintegrates human consciousness. For Camatte, the emergence of new social movements didn’t in any way imply the “simultaneous emergence of revolutionary consciousness.” For such movements “only reflect[ed] the end of bourgeois society based on value.” Camatte continues:

The disintegration began when the general equivalent conflicted with circulation. If the former general equivalent gave way, it was lost. The state had to force all subjects to respect a normalcy based on a standard which established the values of society. The law of value imprisoned human beings, forcing them into stereotypes, into fixed modes of being. The highest development of morality appeared in Kant’s categorical imperative. By engulfing the general equivalent, by becoming its own representation, capital removed the prohibitions and rigid schemas. At that point human beings are fixed to its movement, which can take off from the normal or abnormal, moral or immoral human being.<sup>69</sup>

Within this movement “the evolution of the human being is frozen,”<sup>70</sup> and the continuous development of capital knows only three possible outcomes: a) “the complete autonomy of capital,” where humans become “simple accessories of an automated system;” b) “the mutation of human being,” that is, the emergence of a slavish being that is perfectly controllable; or c) “generalized lunacy,” where capital is capable of realizing every human desire, “but humans cannot find themselves and enjoyment continually lies in the future.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>69</sup> Camatte, 1973, 43.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 46.

In Italy, Camatte was read, and was close to, the *autonomia* currents closer to the councilist ultra-left rather than to Negri's Leninism. I will describe these in greater detail in the next chapter, but some brief introductory aspects are needed here. Amidst the several *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia* dissidents, some felt that class autonomy required the full rejection of the Leninist framework of the party vanguard: workers' councils should be totally autonomous from any centralizing structure. Since the existing workers' councils were in fact organizing first around the Leninist framework of *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua*, and then around organized *Autonomia*, the councilist currents turned to the self-critique of councilism that had emerged within the Italian and Dutch-German ultra-left of the 20s and 30s. Although councilism unearthed a political form of the class that did not hinge on the vanguard party (or on its necessary state-form), it nevertheless remained bound to capitalist social forms in that workers would remain workers managing their own misery<sup>72</sup>.

The self-critique of councilism stood at the base of Camatte's thought (and Debord's too). The ultra-left rejection of the party-form is vindicated once capital overcomes class struggle by becoming autonomous from its embodiment in the law of value: Leninism is not so much politically refused as it is rejected as an historically coherent possibility. With neither the party nor the autonomous councils on the table, a coherent revolutionary practice would then consist in finding the contemporary practices that could replace the autonomy of councils.

Camatte's positions, even though they largely anticipate and survive Italy's '68, are almost an anti-*operaismo*. Camatte accepts the claim that class comes first, that capitalist development answers labour struggles, which was the cornerstone of Tronti's split within the *Quaderni Rossi*. However, this primacy does not lead to the emancipatory autonomy of the class, but to the totalitarian development of capital. He recognizes core aspects of *operaismo*'s orthodoxy, but he thoroughly inverts their meaning.

The Schmittian friend/enemy framework that grounds *operaismo*'s ontology of class on its partisanship and antagonism to capital is now seen as the species' most

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<sup>72</sup> See Anton Pannakoek, *Workers' Councils* (Oakland: AK Press. 2003).

telling sign of its alienation under the increasing autonomization of capital.<sup>73</sup> *Operaismo's* "inversion" of class and party, which grounded the method for understanding emergent struggles, is denounced by Camatte as being fixed to an ontology of politics wholly subsumed under capital. A true inversion would instead mean the abandonment "of this world," that is, an exile from its structural logic.<sup>74</sup> Even the refusal of labour and its valorization of leisure and joy is considered to be a further alienation of the metabolic relation between humans and nature that grounds our species-being. The critical categories which *operaismo* had read as political categories of antagonism are maintained, but upheld as categories of alienation.

Giorgio Cesarano was perhaps Camatte's closest *compagnon de route* within the Italian movement. Older than most of his cohorts, and already an established name in Italian poetry, Cesarano had been active in fascist youth organizations as a very young man. Reaching maturity, he joined the PCI before abandoning it sometime before 1968, which saw him in the streets, fascinated by the youthful rebellion and participating in the aforementioned post-councilist currents, united under the banner of *Critica Radicale*. Cesarano's words stand very closely to Camatte's. In "*Cronica di un ballo mascherato*" ("Chronicle of a Masked Ball," first published in the Italian pro-situ magazine *Puzz* and then in Camatte's journal *Invariance*, Cesarano argues:

A dilatory void is the real content of all fictitious forms. Fictitious capital is the dominant capital: its power is the power of the dilatory void over all forms of human existence chained to the duty of hoping to recuperate "tomorrow" the meaning and plenitude promised within the exchange for the total installment of their lives. (...) In advance of the real crisis of its material development, capital precipitates the divorce between value and concrete production: it valorizes ever more producing "immaterial" and "representative" forms that colonize top to bottom and in depth the "leisure" of a social existence reduced to generalized bidding (...) Being-capital is always more identified with the community of anthropomorphous capital, as fictitious capital's being, the embodied agent of a valorization that subsumes all form of "life."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Camatte. "Inimitie et Extinction," in [revueinvariance.pagesperso-orange.fr/inimitie.html](http://revueinvariance.pagesperso-orange.fr/inimitie.html).

<sup>74</sup> Camatte. "Inversion et Devóilement" in [revueinvariance.pagesperso-orange.fr/inversiondevoilement.html](http://revueinvariance.pagesperso-orange.fr/inversiondevoilement.html).

<sup>75</sup> Giorgio Cesarano, Piero Coppo, and Jose Fallisi, *Cronica de um ballo mascherato* (Milan: Varani 1983), 94.

What is lost in this harrowing tale of alienation—what Cesarano calls “a dilatory void”—cannot but be the space previously undefined by capitalist social relations. This raises a conceptual challenge: how to define this space without positing a human nature, a fixed anthropology, a transhistorical ontology? Cesarano takes up a central concept within Camatte’s corpus: “*Gemeinwesen*” (“community” in German).

*Gemeinwesen* (community) structures Camatte’s work from the abandonment of Bordiguism until his more recent writings. Camatte lifts *Gemeinwesen* from Marx’s claim that “Human being is the true community [*Gemeinwesen*] of men” The “human being” in question is Marx’s 1844 definition of the human as the form of life which emerges through social relations unfolding within metabolic relations with nature. Humans’ true community, their possibility of having non-alienated social relations, rests on a common perception of self-subjectivation through a metabolic exchange with nature. *Gemeinwesen*, then, names the latent possibility of a non-alienated community where the toil and drudgery of labour isn’t separated from the social forms of its life, but where such forms aren’t in themselves reified in anything other than their common and open possibility of becoming. *Gemeinwesen* is a subject whose object is the open process of its own collective subjectivity.

That *Gemeinwesen* is not merely an ideal ontology, but something akin to a political concept, is made explicit in Camatte’s pronouncement on the French ‘68: “we salute with enthusiasm the red week of the Parisian students. After the revolts in Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, Rome, and Madrid, their insurrectional victory is the victory of the human species against the monster capital. *Youth has rebelled against society. Their instincts call for its destruction.*”<sup>76</sup> What is behind the rebellion? Camatte continues, “it is the inadequacy of human life in the dawn of its development within capitalist society. It is an expression of the intolerable rupture within human being, the true *Gemeinwesen* (community) of men and, in that sense, it expresses the profound need for a communist society.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Camatte. “A propos de la Semaine rouge: l’être humain est la véritable communauté (*Gemeinwesen*) de l’homme.” In *Invariance*, série I, n°3, juillet-septembre 1968, 45.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Marx indeed discusses *Gemeinwesen* in terms that resonate with Camatte's:

But do not all revolts, without exception, explode within the “deadly isolation that separates men from the *Gemeinwesen*?” Would the 1789 revolution be possible without this deadly isolation that separated the French bourgeoisie from the *Gemeinwesen*? It was destined to put an end to such isolation. (...) The *Gemeinwesen* where the worker is isolated, however, is entirely different from a political one. The *Gemeinwesen* where his work is separated, is life itself, the physical and intellectual life, the human mores, human activity, human jouissance, human being. The human being is the true *Gemeinwesen* of man. In the same way that the deadly isolation from that being is infinitely more universal, more unbearable, worse, fuller of contradictions than the fact of being isolated in a political *Gemeinwesen*. Similarly, the suppression of such isolation – and even a partial reaction in that sense – a rebellion against such isolation has an infinite magnitude the same way man is infinitely more than the citizen of the state and human life infinitely more than political life<sup>78</sup>.

Cesarano's “dilatatory void” is the void of *Gemeinwesen*. It crystalizes productive identities as “citizenship,” finds evermore opaque mediations between subjectivity and production, it covers social relations under an ever more complex and absurd veil of representations, it atomizes singularities in ever greater detail. Camatte's discussion of the concept would eventually delve into anthropological and biological inquiries into the evolution of mankind, as well as ever more fringe considerations on childhood and nature. The relevance of the concept of *Gemeinwesen* for a discussion on *autonomia* and the concept of movement, however, is not the onto-anthropological dimensions it proposes.

Rather, for my purposes here, the open and malleable ontology of *Gemeinwesen* allows us to identify the inner sociality of struggles – their “invisible organization” – as a positive content that does not rest on any further mediation of value and production. *Gemeinwesen* opens the way beyond Negri and the concepts of class self-valorization and the party that he deploys to carry the antagonism of refusal beyond its movement

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<sup>78</sup> Marx, Karl. “Critical Notes on the Article: ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian’” in *Vorwärts!*, No.64, August 10 1844.

form. As we have seen in the previous chapters, refusal and antagonism are what stands against the alienation of labour and the way real subsumption suspends any possibility of subjectivation through social production. *Operaismo* rightly identifies the emerging social forms of antagonism, how they materialize around concrete struggles inside and outside the factory—but such identification is always based on their expression within a limited repertoire of political action: the “invisible organization” is precisely only visible when it becomes an “organization.” *Gemeinwesen*, on the contrary, grasps the positive contents of such struggles in their pre-institutional stage.

The relevance of *Gemeinwesen* here does not consist of refusing all institutional determinations, nor does this erase the political immediacy of antagonism in struggles. Rather, it assures that even within the antagonist immediacy of such struggles, within their fierce establishment of fields of friendship and enmity, their institutional forms are never necessary.

Whereas self-valorization establishes an abstract measure of equivalence within a proto-sovereign project of constituent power, *Gemeinwesen* suggest that the partiality, spontaneity and invisibility of proletarian refusal are in fact an exercise in an open ontology whose emergence isn't hinged on a political hypostatization. The Schmittian and Leninist framework of *operaismo*, which strongly determined its development and outcome for better or for worse, is thoroughly undermined when the phenomenology of refusal grounds a species-becoming rather than an antagonistic friendship that presupposes enmity. *Operaismo* relies on a Schmittian concept of politics inasmuch as it tacitly defines the *operai* as a form of life in opposition to an inimical entity, namely, capital. As such the friend/enemy distinction becomes the ground of the multiplicity of forms of life, however contingent it may be upon a political apparatus. Camatte's concept of the *Gemeinwesen* as an open becoming of forms of life unshackles their free play from the presupposition of enmity. And as such, this rules out the emergence and constitution of forms of life on the basis of the *ceto politico*.

*Gemeinwesen* offers a perspective from which to address one of the main tensions within *autonomia* and its social form. Like we've seen before, *autonomia* refers both to organized *Autonomia*, that is, the formal organizations and committees striving and competing for a centralized direction of the movement, and the *area of autonomia*, the



sprawling informal network of struggles happening outside the control of unions and parties. On the one hand a *ceto politico*, a specialized political “class,” a cadre of professional militants, on the other hand the political, militant and antagonistic refusal of any such specialization.

Negri’s concept and problematic of self-valorization emerged from this inner tension and served as a way to mediate these two poles. Autonomous struggles needed a conceptual self-consciousness, they needed theory to take themselves as an object of reflection. The *ceto politico* would emerge, realize and legitimate itself through the management of this object. Negri’s concept of self-valorization was the one that was most capable of expressing the *ceto politico*’s programmatic point of view on the movement of *autonomia*. *Gemeinwesen*, on the contrary, expresses the attempt on behalf of the movement to think itself immanently as a latent and open community dissolving all of its previous social and productive roles, refusing any mediation that exist beyond itself or through the crystallization of any one of its aspects, experimenting with alternative forms of symbolic and concrete production and reproduction. *Autonomia*’s elements of desertion, of dropping out, of countercultural marginality, of petty criminality, of unstructured and aimless armed struggle, find a sounder framework in *Gemeinwesen* than in any programmatic structure. It helps us to reassess the problematic of the movement that I delineated above in relation to Negri’s call for a party, namely, the movement as communal exile versus the movement as military power. For if the movement as a whole did not decisively choose one or the other, how were they both able to coincide, or exist alongside each other in the same movement—sometimes to the point of becoming indistinguishable?

A tentative answer can be gathered by attending to how *Gemeinwesen*, defined as a purely autonomous nature that dissolves everything in its path, also quickly shows its limits as concept. Cesarano argues:

Radical critique<sup>79</sup> is the very movement where the proletarianized fight against the domination of the fictitious, unmasking the organization of appearances. Ever since the fictitious and its poisoning promises insinuate themselves within every existence, emptying

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<sup>79</sup> Cesarano and the post-councilist currents called themselves the movement of “radical critique.”

every living present of meaning, it finds itself confronted with the growing fury of a hunger for truth and meaning arising from the very body of the species. (...) the ongoing struggles are above all else an unmaking and a denunciation of the false. (...) At the extreme point of the contradiction between capital and the living, the real end of the revolution cannot but be the destruction of capital and the realization of the human species as a community living in a relation of organic coherence with the natural universe (...) Capital's domination over a subhuman collectivity and a poisoned planet always reveals itself as the last obstacle separating the creative self-genesis of the species-community from its latent world. (...) In its processual action, proletarian self-management is, essentially, such creative self-genesis: a determinate negation of all that exists as the organization of the fictitious and an active transformation of the existent as the site of the real origin of the human species-community and its world.<sup>80</sup>

Cesarano's tirade is highly ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, he announces a furious hunger for ontological niceties such as "truth" and "meaning" and attempts to ground them on an immediate and sensual experience of the species. On the other hand, he posits the coming of a true human essence living in a relation of "organic coherence with the natural universe," which will supersede our contemporary "subhumanity." Such a claim isn't only extremely naïve, it is also somewhat dubious, for it leaves open what the exact political implications of the distinction between humanity and a fictitious "subhumanity" would be.

Even *Gemeinwesen*, the freest of ontologies, cannot help but to posit a humanity and a subhumanity, an interior and an exterior. Cesarano can only posit our present condition as "fictitious," "separated" and "reified" on the basis of an ideal realm of purity laying beyond the shameful desires, passions and pleasures of "fake" existence. But this is also precisely where *operaismo* shows its relevance. Workers were a "rude pagan race," not fallen angels who had forgotten how to play. The immediacy of their desires showed a dirty and crass materialism which clashed with Camatte's abstract and naturalized biological communism.

It is from this confrontation between *operaismo*'s theory of movement, as expressed in *autonomia*, and Camatte's concept of the *Gemeinwesen*, that we can arrive

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<sup>80</sup> Cesarano, *Apocalisse e Rivoluzione*, 103-105.

at an understanding of *autonomia* that goes beyond a mere historical account or a partial ideological consolidation in post-*operaismo*. *Movimento* as antagonism and partisanship, not of a *ceto politico*, but of the attempt to unfold an open ontology of forms of life. *Gemeinwesen* not as remote, ethereal and idealized ontological condition, but as a dirty and gritty process materializing in imperfect forms which, nevertheless, do express tentative attempts to leave behind capital's forms of command and domination. That these forms are condemned to failure does not invalidate them, nor does it condemn their appraisal to a vain eulogy for their good faith and earnest intentions. On the contrary, not only can their assessment be grounded on the historical and policies benchmarks they themselves refuses (a change in policy, etc.), but such trial and error is an integral part of any such historical process.

Franco Piperno, one of *autonomia*'s historical militants and a key leader within organized *Autonomia*, understood this perfectly. In a pamphlet from 1979, Piperno writes a bittersweet description of the movement which plays on the attempt to salvage a concept of use-value from its dialectical hold within the commodity form:

Use value is the disdain of fixed employment, maybe even two blocks from home; it's the horror felt towards learning a craft; it's mobility; it's the flight from rigid performance, understood as active resistance to the commodity form, to becoming a commodity, to being totally subjugated to the movements of the commodity [...] Use value is the naive hope born with the hundreds of thousands of experiences of "counter economy" in agriculture, in services and the neighbourhoods, born to live precariously and then die, as tender allusion to a different form of social labour and a different form of distribution of labour time [...] Use value is the abstract inhumanity of murder and armed struggle—a chimerical solution to a real problem, a dense mourning for the totality of one's own possibilities, a desperate attempt to make real, with impatient pride, one's own social strength; that nevertheless, in the skewed form of military violence, rewards precisely the contrary for which it stands.<sup>81</sup>

Piperno closely follows Negri's hypostatization of use-value as self-valorization, but his description is largely based on the description of a latent unrealized potential. Piperno writes this text on the eve of *autonomia*'s collapse as a mass movement, when the possibility of it becoming a force for redefining the entire left was slowly fading away

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<sup>81</sup> Franco Piperno, "Sul Lavoro non Operaio" (1979), in *Metropoli. L'Autonomia Possibile Vol. II*, (Rome: Pgreco, 2017), 123.

and when a jadedness towards its methods and repertoires was beginning to show through the cracks. Piperno's passage encapsulates the problematic of *autonomia* drawn thus far: the movement sought to determine new social and conceptual forms through the abolition of existing ones. Its conceptual advancements trip on its material concretizations and vice-versa. What remains, already in 1979, is a bittersweet disappointment that is nevertheless proud of what fantastic trouble and beautiful defeat it was able to pull off.

## VI. Partisan Gemeinwesen

Any claim of totalization carries within it a paradoxical presupposition: that one is at the same time included in a totality while able to grasp it, that the social reality is both more than the sum of its parts yet only ever shows itself through them, that somehow all mystifications are plucked from the root even though their infinite motion and elusive transformations. The question transcends its epistemological formulation to take on ethical and existential contours: how to live with a conscience so finely tuned to the grimness of a world unfolding as the very impossibility of its supersession?

For the cast of characters involved in the movements of the '60s and the '70s, this question obviously didn't come with an easy answer, but through stances and affectations. Seen from a distance, beyond their clumsy vanity, some of these assume anecdotal and tragical facades: Guy Debord's aristocratic bitterness and petulance, growing ever more corrosive until his suicide in 1996; Giorgio Cesarano committing suicide in 1975, months after writing a "survival manual" for revolutionaries dealing with the defeat of the struggles which had before made them feel so alive. Hundreds of others lived more anonymous and banal variations of these tragedies.

Amidst these damned figures of the post war ultra-left, Negri's infamous optimism stands out. Persecution, prison, exile, and infamy seemed not to have tainted his unwavering faith that each new revolt announces a new class composition. While tendentially excessive and maladjusted, especially after the demise of *autonomia*, this position nevertheless shows a fundamental affectual difference *vis-à-vis* its contemporary counterparts.

While the radical intensity of the French and German '68 rested on niche milieus, in Italy the size and extension of the struggles truly broke down the walls of the revolutionary or countercultural "scene." This meant that the movement's existential and ethical affects and forms became more complex and diverse than elsewhere. In *autonomia*—in its pamphlets, banners and slogans—a cynical, sharp, and violent joy is to be found that, while sharing common themes, is profoundly at odds with situationist petulance. Both currents displayed a profound refusal of all order, but whereas the pro-situationist groups seemed for the most part to show a quasi-aristocratic contempt for mass culture and earthly pleasures, *autonomia* unashamedly assumed the guilty pleasure of enjoying the material culture of capital through its destruction: "we want everything."<sup>82</sup>

Something distinguishes Negri from most of his cohorts within the European ultra-left milieus, as he seems to be the only one to properly grasp the unbridled joy of collective action, and the only one who properly understands this as a political and philosophical question. Not the joy of the event, nor insurrectionary catharsis, but precisely a certain despairing joy of militancy, one that is contingent on broader social dynamics, precisely the ones lacking in Germany, France, and elsewhere.

This accursed sensuality of the insurrection is never more evident than in Negri's infamous words:

Separation is what is sought, but it is expressed in a powerful will to conflict; rupture is what continually launches relays of destructive will against reality, and desire is what exerts itself to be desperation. In short, it is a positivity that commands the negative and imposes it. Yet you don't know how to transform this uncontrollable tension into hope except by living it. Hope is a projection, a continuum, an analogy to be postulated. (...) Nothing reveals the immense historical positivity of workers' self-valorization more completely than sabotage, this continual activity of the sniper, the saboteur, the absentee, the deviant, the criminal that I find myself living. I immediately feel the warmth of the workers' and proletarian community again every time I don the ski mask. This solitude of

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<sup>82</sup> The title of Nanni Ballestrini's novel about the Mirafiori 1969 riots. See Nanni Ballestrini, *We Want Everything*, trans., Rachel Kushner (New York: Verso, 2016).

mine is creative, and this separateness of mine is the only real collectivity that I know. Nor does the happiness of the result escape me: every act of destruction and sabotage redounds upon me as a sign of class fellowship. Nor does the probable risk disturb me: on the contrary, it fills me with feverish emotion, like waiting for a lover.<sup>83</sup>

This joy is a punk joy, a quasi-nihilist *gemeinwesen*. It is neither the intimate joy of eroticism and play, nor the joy of family and friends. Rather, it is Bakunin's destructive urge, an accursed pleasure, whose "constructive" aspect is almost but an excuse. Negri's description of the thrill of the balaclava seems today fetishistic and superficial, a youthful and bashful claim tragically full of sound and fury; but it also reveals something important and unavoidable about the bodily experience of insurrection. The tense and electric pleasure felt in rupturing the perceived shackles of command does not seek any justification beyond that same immediate pleasure. It enacts a relation not with nature, but with the naturalization of capital. This is not to say that *autonomia* is nihilistic. While parts of it certainly flirted with nihilism,<sup>84</sup> and while it certainly had a self-destructive and apocalyptic streak, it also featured thousands of collective projects built upon the joy of collectively living, drinking, growing, and so on. But even these utopian projects, in all their *naïveté*, once again, seem to distance themselves from the dandyesque urban dwelling smugness of the French and German ultra-left, through a more evident and bodily joy.<sup>85</sup>

On the one hand this dark, perverse joy, the happiness and freedom felt in the insurrection, the lust for violence, the enchantment with fire, the urge to destroy—all of this seems profoundly at odds with the workers' movement and with any concern for the integrity of the social sphere. But on the other hand, it is also tendentially at odds with

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<sup>83</sup> Negri, "Il Dominio e il Sabotaggio," in *I Libri del Rogo*, 259.

<sup>84</sup> In some of the period's counterculture one even finds an unashamed appraisal for heroin consumption as a means of temporary exile.

<sup>85</sup> One possible explanation here would be that the movement's composition was far less cosmopolitan than elsewhere, being mostly made of workers and students one generation removed from a mostly rural reality, and hence hostile to any kind of social "sophistication" deemed too bourgeois. Lest we forget, the *operaï* were a "rude pagan race," as far from the *Deux Magots* as possible. Other cultural explanations might also be pertinent, such as the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism on their stance toward pleasure, or the emergence of the punk movement in the late '70s, which shared numerous similarities with *autonomia*. See Keir, "When two sevens clash: punk and *autonomia*," Libcom.org, Re: 01/01/2020, <https://libcom.org/library/punk-Autonomia>.

Negri's lingering reconstruction of the social field through self-valorization. Negri both embodies this affect and tries to control it. While his brilliance is in grasping this joy and energy more than any other of his contemporaries could, his limits are with respect to his inability to properly grasp what came before and after such joy and lust: how such openness was something other than its forms of appearance, how it extended over the insurrection, the movement, the party, etc. The next chapter will discuss this thoroughly.

It is from this joy that something other than the despair of subsumption can be thought, a partisan *gemeinwesen* in that does not arrive as the subjectivation of a "true" nature, but precisely against the way human nature has been posited, or, more concretely, against the way capital posits itself as nature.

Negri's proverbial refusal of Hegel, often wrongly ascribed to the whole of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, rests on the possibility that this potentiality is capable of breaking out of the dialectical grip of Hegel's philosophy of right. Negri's most systematic engagement with Hegelianism comes in 1995, at a midpoint in his career, once the revolutionary possibilities of the 70s were buried deeply beneath the triumph of the 80s counterrevolution, but before the anti-globalization movement and his wide notoriety after the publication of *Empire* in 1999.

*Futur Antérieur* was a French journal in which some of the *autonomia* diaspora<sup>86</sup> found the *agora* from which to build a post-*operaismo*<sup>87</sup>. In a 1995 special issue on Hegel, Negri describes how Hegel's philosophy of right<sup>88</sup> presents the most accomplished conceptual framework for the true question of modernity: "the control of living labor", "the command over social work"<sup>89</sup>. Within the *Rechtstphilosophie*, the epic of the spirit is

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<sup>86</sup> As mentioned before, after the April 9<sup>th</sup> arrests, a significant number of *autonomia* militants found exile in France.

<sup>87</sup> It is also in *Futur Antérieur* that we find the first publication of many of Agamben's most famous texts, "The coming community" and others.

<sup>88</sup> Negri, Toni. "Hegel: La fin de la modernité et la possibilité du communisme" in *Futur Antérieur*. Special Hegel issue. Paris. 1995

<sup>89</sup> Negri's reading of Hegel is apparently similar to Adorno's *Three Studies on Hegel* (1963). In both cases, labour is the true essence of spirit. Even so, for Adorno this labour is abstract labour, whereas for Negri it is social or living labour, a substantial difference that illustrates the gap between both thoughts. Negri's expression, "the command over social labour" is also significant, for it is a strong comment on Marx's

but of the subsumption of labour in the rigid systematization of a dialectical framework which stands for nothing but state power. Negri considers that for Hegel the concrete's immediate and feverish activity can only fully constitute a pathway towards the absolute, towards an ethical universe, inasmuch as it is subjected to the rigid structure of law and state. Only through labour objectified as second nature in law and sovereignty can spirit truly become subject, assuming itself as object. "A nature radically built by the social activity of men, all taken by the profound necessity of the labour of the idea. Individual hard labour is included and contained in the purpose of the absolute labour of spirit. Labour is the substance of the world of spirit<sup>90</sup>"

Labour as substance: both the ground of Marx's theory of value and that which Negri will come to challenge as historically defunct<sup>91</sup>. Hegel sees "society as constituting itself through the laborious synthesis of singular motivations and the determinations of the whole of human labour<sup>92</sup>" Whereas the young Hegel saw the singular and universal uniting in ethical community, in the Philosophy of Right such process can only come through the subjection of labour to the legal and sovereign architecture of the intersubjectivity of desire<sup>93</sup>.

Tronti's disdain "for the civilization of men<sup>94</sup>" directly challenges the claim of a universality of desires unfolding into the sovereign hypostatization of spirit and the need for the Hobbesian Leviathan as the great arbitrator of conflict grounded in such a claim. Desires do assume antagonist forms, only not as a compound of atomized individual desires that congregate into a great dispenser of rights. Rather, such conflict of desires

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definition of capital as command over free labour. The Frankfurtian rereading of dialectics is but briefly mentioned: 20th century "Hegelianism" can no longer produce subordination, instead it "opens, inside and against the absolute, no longer triumphal but mystical or ascetical, always more tragic, always more negative (...) Hegelian totality dissolves itself in its constituting contradictions, without any possibility of triumph". Ibid 174.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 159

<sup>91</sup> Precisely, as suggested before, it is arguable if for Negri the question is not of an end to the law of value, but if it ever functioned as such.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 161

<sup>93</sup> Hobbes.

<sup>94</sup> Tronti, *Operai e Capitale*, 5. The recently published English translation of Tronti's work mistranslates this particular quote, inverting it to a lament for capital's contempt for "the civilization of men"



constitutes opposing social fields and forms whose hostility stem less from a common object of desire than due to opposing forms of life. The desire which would ground a human nature of *bellum omnes contra omni* is very much the direct result of the enclosure of productivity within the value and commodity form. The reduction of tentative class formations to individual problematics is what's at work within such systematization of desire, as Hegel claims: "need and labour risen to universality thus form for themselves, within an enormous people, an immense system of community and reciprocal dependency<sup>95</sup>". Individual labour, inasmuch as it responds to atomized desire, becomes the substance and ground of universal ethical value.

Negri's critique hinges on the possibility that Hegel's bottomless negativity can only be made tangible through an association with the state. This also means, however, that the state is the guarantee of a bottomless negativity that sustains the principle of equivalence and subsumption that organizes capital as civilization. Subsumption is inherent to the process of labour becoming spirit, which implies that the history of spirit is the history of subsumption.

Only through a concept of finitude, Negri argues, can an ontology of being *qua* ontology of labour, and of social labour, can be freed from such grapple. Finitude as the Heideggerian relation of man with being, in which its finite condition is in fact a condition of freedom, existential free will, and adventure. Negri mentions Heidegger's critique of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but he will pursue finitude in different terms, not as an existential openness that springs forth from the consciousness of death nor from the dwelling of facticity, but rather as the feverish creativity of social labour, of the "self-valorization" as previously discussed. Finitude contra Hegel: "It is clear that the critique of the Hegelian system, of the place given to labour within it, of its exaltation within exploitation, to its emancipation towards its recuperation in the state, won't be possible as long as the basis on which it is traditionally grounded aren't radically transformed. As long as critique can't define a new historical being, as finitude and potentiality; as long as critique hasn't definitely set aside dialectics, its object will continue to slip away<sup>96</sup>"

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<sup>95</sup> Hegel, GWF. In *Jenenser Realphilosophie*, Vol. 1, éd. J. Hoffmeister-Lipsia, 1932. P. 239 in Negri, *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 170

Whether the Hegelian corpus can truly be reduced to such an account or not falls much beyond the scope of this thesis, but Negri's argument is at least compelling, inasmuch as it manages to expand and develop the crude refusal of Hegel in early *operaismo*, strongly hinged on Gentile's and Croce's historicism. To refuse Hegel meant to refuse both the tragic negativity and the way through which Hegelian dialectics tentatively closes upon itself. Heidegger's critique opens the way for Negri's affirmation of a potentiality of social labour that breaks through such dialectical hold, positing ever new feverish determinations.

The problem, as thoroughly explained in this chapter, is not only how can a shackled form of social labour assume any sort of conceptual hold without reconstituting within itself a similar dialectics. The question remains concerning why, according to Negri, the perception of that alleged ontological openness is still forever dependent on its concretization, on its social realization, on its manifestation through social forms of production.

On the contrary, to value the possibility of a potentiality that eschews the totalizing gesture of subsumption means to acknowledge that the possibility of indetermination stands out amidst the feverish concreteness happening within such ontological openness. If this possibility isn't assumed, then the concept of living labour risks becoming stuck between two opposites: on the one hand a naïve but cruel optimism that reposit labour as the structure of state and law, on the other hand a quasi-nihilistic autonomy of concretization: potentiality for potentiality's sake.

The first part of this thesis described how the vicissitudes of Marx's concept of labour—being at once alienation and subjectivation—could exist side by side as long as labour was posited as a transhistorical reality that existed prior to capitalism, despite assuming manifold historical forms. That is not to say that pre-capitalist labourers were in any way less alienated, but that their alienation resulting from their abstract capture also afforded them a subjectivation. Real subsumption implodes this tense arrangement inasmuch as subjectivation is wholly subsumed in the valorization process, which swallows up all of society and subjects it to the rule of abstract equivalence. At this moment, value, as alienated labor, loses its dialectical impetus. Yet it is at this very point

that a dimension of antagonism emerges, expressed first in the practices of the refusal of labour and then in the social form such practices assume once they become self-conscious and begin to generalize transversally. The temptation for such social forms to posit themselves as the restoration of the balance between alienation and subjectivation stalls when it becomes obvious that abstract production is as such but an ideal expression of the metaphysical hold of real subsumption. That, however, doesn't mean that the manifold expressions of antagonism are incapable of any determination and are condemned to forever spin around the illusion of their immediacy. On the contrary, by assuming such antagonism as subjectivation proper, one can finally arrive at a general sense of Marx's original definition of non-alienated labour, *species-being*.

*Operaismo*, and its expressions within *autonomia*, are here read within the problematics of the critique of political economy. Italy's post-war period saw workers' movements fundamentally challenge the structure of the institutional left. *Neo-capitalismo*, in Panzieri's terms, or real subsumption in Negri's, formed the background against which a movement of refusal and antagonism sprung forth and became conscious of itself as such. It is in this process of self-consciousness that *autonomia* developed and collapsed over the aporia of its political forms: on the one hand, such antagonism refused all authority, on the other hand, such consciousness hinged on the actions of a *ceto politico*, a political elite that sought to affirm itself as vanguard. Beyond their opposition, I argue that the tentative talent of the area of *autonomia* was the capacity to conceptualize forms of organization whose goal was the affirmation of *Gemeinwesen*—community—through a fundamentally negative methodology of antagonism and refusal. It was only within refusal and antagonism that such *Gemeinwesen* could be built and experienced. The second part of this thesis will take a deeper look at the relations between *Gemeinwesen* and antagonism.

## Part II: Gesture

### Chapter IV–Prairie fire: violence and/or exile

[T]he '77 Movement was the field of battle of fiercely opposed political groups—some militant, others pacifist: within this view, organizations of diverse natures—some created for war, others for peace—disputed the political space among themselves. If we, however, view the phenomenon from its external aspects (...), we then realize that the movement of the last few years, in Italy as well as the rest of Europe, has intimately interwoven, in a continuous and systematic way, legal and illegal initiatives, both violent and nonviolent, of masses and small groups, and has based its actions at one time on the laws of a state of peace, at another on a state of war: this fact is not lived within a single organization, but has crossed them all, overpowering them and forcing cohabitation of different organized groups with the same social subject. This characteristic, this capacity to mix peace and war, to produce offensive initiatives without producing soldiers, has not only constituted the strength of the movement, but this is an element central to its being a communist and subversive movement. To erode the distinction between peace and war means placing oneself on the terrain of critique of the State, it means doubting the principles of legitimization of political power, which affirms a distinction between 'State' and 'society,' 'public' and 'private,' 'general' and 'private.'

Lucio Castellano, "Vivere con la Guerriglia"<sup>1</sup>

Previously, we looked at the categories of the critique of political economy in order to derive a conceptual framework from which to understand the area of *autonomia* as a partisan *gemeinwesen*, or "community." Within this second part, I will develop this framework further through a discussion of *autonomia* itself, that seeks to understand it beyond the terms it used to think itself. This implies, first and foremost, a critique of the Negrian framework that organized its self-perception.

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<sup>1</sup> Castellano, Lucio. 'Vivere Con La Guerriglia'. *Preprint*, 1978.

Throughout the 1970s, Negri attempted to give structure and direction to the explosion and expansion of autonomous struggles by offering up a conceptual framework that revolved around self-valorization. However, the multiplicity of positions and insurrectionary currents that opened up within *autonomia* was irreducible to any common political structure. Negri partially acknowledged the challenge of politically unifying the leaderless and informal area of *autonomia* when he claimed that the party-less struggles for “self-valorization” would eventually turn toward reformism or terrorism.<sup>2</sup> Thus he argued that self-valorization struggles needed a concrete synthesis—a party—that could somehow direct them. If self-valorization, as seen before, is a concept grounded on the need to structure a political institution, then it becomes obvious how the questions of “reformism” and “terrorism” hinge on Negri’s own conceptualization, for nowhere else was there any “self-valorization” on the verge of degeneration, hanging on to the possibility of coalescing in the new party of organized *Autonomia*.

Obviously, the area of *autonomia* had in itself both the possibility of delving into institutional or cultural practices that would abandon the field of antagonism and of escalating its antagonism into open confrontation with the state, to the point of assuming openly militaristic traits. Regardless, the concept of self-valorization—and of its party—could only hasten rather than prevent such outcomes. It was precisely through such abstractions that *autonomia* came to be understood as the political and historical vindication of a concrete class composition, one that allowed it to understand itself abstractly through a logical structure that could be used to legitimate any concrete means of struggle, independently of other concerns.

Negri’s approach consists of describing the problem in such a way that his own position is the only reasonable one: once the choices are between “reformism” or “terrorism,” the centre cannot but hold. A complex contradiction is apparently solved by turning the opposed positions into their caricatures, reserving for oneself the role of their sensible mediation. However, this only mystifies the contradiction.

Negri’s terms oppose, on the one hand, an unethical use of violence driven by despair or fanaticism (terrorism) and, on the other hand, a tendency towards mediation,

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<sup>2</sup> Antonio Negri, “Il Dominio e il Sabotaggio” (1978). *I Libri del Rogo* (Rome: Derive Approdi. 2006), 257.

where partisanship degenerates into a dialogue with power through inclusion in institutions or through the social recognition of marginal countercultural identities. The processes did indeed express two competing dynamics, but they cannot be reduced to “terrorism or reformism.”

Instead of this opposition, we find two different currents of *autonomia*: those which favoured a political and military organization and those which favoured a strategy of desertion and exile based on an existential understanding of refusal and antagonism. In their own ways, both of these currents privilege their political method over all other means of struggle. Both crystalize around a particular element of *autonomia* and overshadow all other political concerns that cannot be addressed through their characteristic approach.

Therefore, instead of centring the debate in terms of “terrorism” and “reformism,” I would like to focus it on the relation between the political means of struggle (such as violence and institutionalization) and their ends (or lack thereof), namely, either the revolutionary conquest of power or the abolition of power through forms of exile.

This chapter will discuss *autonomia*’s gestures of violence and exile in order to find a common element beyond their programmatic synthesis in a conceptual or political form, such as “self-valorization” or the “party of *autonomia*.” I will argue how such apparently contradictory gestures, organized violence and exile, established a common conceptual problematic of the gesture<sup>3</sup>, which *autonomia* never truly solved as such. Even if their material expressions surely differed, the structural logic that sustained them was grounded on a practice of undoing the apparatuses of command, which contrasted with the affirmative *telos* of most political action in *autonomia*. Rather than “party versus exile” or “violence versus subjectivation,” the tension specific to the area of *autonomia* lies between constituent and destituent power. These concepts, however, would only emerge decades later.

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<sup>3</sup> I am using the concept of gesture as used by Giorgio Agamben. Gesture is a “pure means”, not mediated by a *telos* (an instrumental end) or an *arché*, (a grounding principles). Gesture concerns enduring and continuing rather than addressing what is to be done. See Agamben, Giorgio, *Mezzi Senza Fine* (1996).

## I. Comrade Walther P38

*Autonomia*'s insurrectional impetus is generally considered to be a part of '68's broad political problematic of the emergence of new subjectivities whose struggles drifted away from previous forms of participation and representation. These included student riots and workers' wildcat strikes that progressively turned towards armed struggle, social tensions that exploded into the streets, the wars in Vietnam and Angola that were "brought home", and the waves of repression that drove dissent underground, and so on.

Two particularities emerge. The first is conceptual. Within *autonomia*, violence was justified through how it interrupted and corroded a particular domain of capital over the social territory. It was perceived as a tactic of disruption. It emerged as a swift and precise territorial takeover, rather than a cathartic explosion or as the means for capturing sovereign institutions. The second particularity follows the first: the endurance and extension of the area of *autonomia* meant that such violence gave rise to social and political forms that are impossible to attain in the episodic nature of other contemporary situations. Organized *Autonomia*'s foray into armed struggle in the late '70s derived from (amongst many other things) its inability to properly understand this insurrectional impetus.

The chronological sequence of violence within Italy's long '68 reveals it to increasingly gain preponderance over the movement until it eventually engulfs it.

Inasmuch as *autonomia* signified a rupture with institutional mediation, the struggles of the '60s and '70s were inherently illegalist in that they blatantly exceeded the confines of representation and institutional legitimacy. As seen previously, the description of the shopfloor struggles of the industrial North that appeared in the early journals of *operaismo* read like an inventory of disruption: sabotage, absenteeism, physical violence against bouncers and bosses, and so forth. The "red biennial" of 1968 and 1969 saw the expansion and intensification of these elements. The factory and university occupations quickly spilled into violent confrontations in the streets, expanding

the latent and underground antagonism into a generalized social practice. Negri's description of a demonstration in 1969 is worth quoting at length:

What happened on July 3<sup>rd</sup>? Internal articulated factory struggles become general, "wildcat" strikes stop production, internal demonstrations close Mirafiori's workshops: All of Mirafiori is overrun with revolt. (...) The political dimension of this struggle is clear to everybody: unions are thoroughly overcome, the demands are those built by workers' autonomy in the previous years—equal wages for everyone, radical reduction of working hours, etc. The struggle's political character is underlined by the attack on the division of labour and on the internal hierarchies. (...) When the factory's isolation crumbles and the mass of revolutionary students fraternize with the workers, the anti-capitalist character of the struggle suddenly becomes clear. (...) When the factory stops producing, when the union loses control, the boss reacts and closes it: a shutdown becomes unavoidable, but the answer to that provocation is also unavoidable. Workers want to re-enter Mirafiori, but the police are blatantly spread over all of the factory gates. (...) The pressure from the workers' demonstration is barely held back by the riot police: they charge. Barricades come up in all of *Corso Traiano*, the police are pushed back to Mirafiori's gates by an unceasing rain of rocks and Molotov cocktails. Armoured van attacks multiply, but all the adjoining streets are now occupied. (...) Meanwhile, confrontations are taking place all over, from *Corso Traiano* to the Faculty of Architecture, on the river Pó. (...) Most comrades move to Nichelino, a workers' neighbourhood on the other side of the city, and the night goes by in confrontations with the police, which wants to evict the area, with barricades popping up and all the things that happen in situations like this. (...) I lived that day as an enormous party: it proved that the factory's command and discipline over the metropolis could be inverted.<sup>4</sup>

The systematization of this insurrectional violence into a planned practice was at first indistinguishable from the multiple actions being carried out in the factories and universities by informally organized students and workers. One could identify something like an organized violence only when certain militant groups (such as *Sinistra Proletaria* and the *Collettivi Politici Metropolitani*) decided to transpose the *lotta dura*<sup>5</sup> from the factory into the metropolitan territory. With the sympathy of the biggest organizations of

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<sup>4</sup> Antonio Negri, *Storia di un Comunista* (Milan: Ponte Alle Grazie, 2015), 371. Negri refers to the *Piazza Statuto* riots of the mid 60s, which the early *operaisti* had seen as a confirmation of their thesis. While the *Piazza Statuto* riots had affirmed such class composition as tendency, 68-69 had affirmed it as hegemonic.

<sup>5</sup> Struggles which employed illegal and violent means.



the post-'68 extra-parliamentary left (*Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua*), several small groups began to carry out actions of sabotage and the destruction of private property, as well as direct attacks on right-wing organizations. These groups publicly assumed responsibility for these actions as combatant organizations. What was a latent and inherent element of workers' struggles began to be taken as a self-sufficient methodology and organized as such.

The state's unwillingness to negotiate with the rising influence of the autonomous and extra-parliamentary left became evident in the 1969 bombing of a bank in Milan's Piazza Fontana that killed 16 people. Anarchist Franco Pinelli was arrested in the aftermath and thrown out of a police station's window, dying instantly, despite the fact that his non-involvement in the affair was abundantly clear.<sup>6</sup> The state's hand in the bombing and in the extra-judicial killing was evident for most of the extra-parliamentary left. The argument ensued that the state was willing to plan a military answer to the widespread dissent,<sup>7</sup> given the incapacity of the Italian bourgeoisie to solve the crisis raised by the autonomous workers' struggles. The need to develop autonomous military means that would play an offensive role became a common concern throughout the extra-parliamentary left.<sup>8</sup>

The precise contours of the response and of its political-military organizations became the source of strenuous debates. The movement's violence had thus far followed an expansion of the factory struggles into the metropolitan territory. It operated mostly as the disruption of metropolitan governmental and productive structures, focusing on housing and transport struggles. Even if they employed violent means, these actions refused to organize themselves along a military framework and all hierarchized

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<sup>6</sup> Over the years, investigation has consistently pointed to the secret services acting in coordination with several fascist groups. *Piazza Fontana* revealed the very real possibility of the state's unsanctioned violence.

<sup>7</sup> Parts of the Italian secret service, together with the CIA and masonic lodge P2, were in fact involved in crafting a "strategy of tension," in which the intensification of political conflict would allow for the illegalization of the PCI. Details are obviously still clouded in secrecy.

<sup>8</sup> A thorough account of this ordeal can be found in *L'Orda d'Oro*, eds. Nanni Ballestrini and Primo Moroni, Primo (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1988).

specialization: they identified as militants who used violence rather than as the armed wing of a movement.

In contrast to this proto-*autonomia* position, some of the far left organized around a *coup d'état* hypothesis, claiming that the authoritarian right was getting ready to take power. This was through and through a more orthodox position, which saw the burgeoning proletarian violence as the antechamber of a red army capable of taking on state power.

Evoking the omnipresent memory of the resistance to fascism,<sup>9</sup> with its mythology of military confrontation, many, even within the PCI, lamented the post-war surrendering of arms, feeling that the historical role of the resistance should have been to pursue civil war to achieve socialism in Italy. Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, a famous Milan publisher born into one of the city's richest families, congregated around him both sides of the discussion. On one side *operaismo*'s organizations—PO, LC, and plenty others—that would later dissolve into organized *Autonomia*. On the other, the burgeoning third-worldist left.<sup>10</sup> The type of violence defended by the anti-imperialist groups heavily contrasted with what had emerged from *operaismo*. It was more centralized, specialized, militarized, and inspired by the varied anti-imperialist struggles going on in Africa, Asia and South America. It sought to transpose their guerrilla tactics to the metropolis through the principles of urban guerrilla warfare laid by the Uruguayan *Tupamaros* and the Brazilian communist militant Carlos Marighella.

A defining split between these parts, which also helped define what was specific to each one of them, came in 1972, when Feltrinelli was found dead next to an explosive device. The extra-parliamentary left was quick to blame the state, and only *Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio*, who revealed Feltrinelli's participation in the *Gruppi d'Azione Partigiana* (an underground military organization), assumed his death to be an

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<sup>9</sup> The Walther P38 gun attested to this symbolic legacy. It was named in several slogans and became one of the period's icons. The P38 was the gun issued by the *Wehrmacht*, plenty of which had been captured by the resistance in the '40s and then handed over to the extra-parliamentary left in the '70s.

<sup>10</sup> Having travelled extensively in Latin America, Feltrinelli met Régis Debray and Fidel Castro, and was eventually named a suspect in the killing of Roberto Quintanillo, one of Che Guevara's executors.

accident due to the poor handling of explosives.<sup>11</sup> This led to serious accusations and various splits within the movement.

The “democratic” factions were adamantly opposed to armed struggle and began to shift toward electoral politics.<sup>12</sup> These included Rossana Rossanda’s newspaper *Il Manifesto*<sup>13</sup> and *Avanguardia Operaia*, a parliamentary party led by Magri, the author of *The Tailor of Ulm*, who had left and would later return to the PCI.<sup>14</sup>

The others were split over the type of violence to pursue. *Potere Operaio* defended a kind of decentred, insurrectionary and spontaneous territorial violence, focused on political and productive structures and not on physical targets, whose objectives were to be set by the movement (even if the actions were to be carried out by smaller militant groups). Negri discussed the need for the construction of “red brigades” capable of

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<sup>11</sup> Conspiracy theories abound about the Italian ‘70s, having almost become a genre in Italian television and media. One of *Operaismo*’s touchstones is how firmly it refused most conspiracy theories whose aim was to salvage the movement’s public image: the movement was violent and should own such violence, even when it turned excessive or brutal. This contrasts both with the orthodox left (especially in the Feltrinelli case) but also with the pro-situ groups, especially Debord’s and Sanguinetti’s claim that the red brigades were infiltrated by the CIA and the state. *Autonomia*’s pundits, even if critical of the Red Brigades, solidly refused such claims. This extends to a critique of *Dietrologia*, the position where behind any insurrection one would find the hand of a geopolitical power.

<sup>12</sup> With quite poor results: in the 1976 results *Democrazia Proletaria* had 1.5% of the votes for the parliamentary assembly and 0.25% for the senate. “Il cartello elettorale di Democrazia proletaria (1975 - 1976),” last modified April 5, 2000, last accessed September 20, 2020, [comune.bologna.it/iperbole/asnsmp/cronologiadp3.htm](http://comune.bologna.it/iperbole/asnsmp/cronologiadp3.htm).

<sup>13</sup> *Il Manifesto* and *Potere Operaio* discussed their fusion at one point in the early 70s, which might sound unbelievable *a posteriori*. *Il Manifesto* is a newspaper associated with the new left, still being published today (Rossanda passed away in September 2020), whose origins lay in a ‘68 PCI split. *Potere Operaio*, on the contrary, occupied a quite more radical position within the 70s left: it deemed itself “the party of insurrection”. Nevertheless, that such a possibility was deemed possible shows something clearly: that despite its insurrectional intentions, organized *Autonomia* never abandoned trying to make the expressions of the autonomous workers struggles hegemonic on the left as a whole (both the PCI/PSI and every other faction). Its insurrectional program was hinged on the possibility that the spontaneity of struggles would force the left to pick a side. The left did end up picking a side, except it was the other one.

<sup>14</sup> The only history of the PCI published in English, which almost doesn’t mention *autonomia* except as “terrorist organization.”

defending “red bases,” the burgeoning expressions of the *autonomia* movement.<sup>15</sup> Here he was talking about the red brigades as a general concept rather than the group which had just begun operating under that same name by that point. This signalled a clear conceptual and political divide: Negri’s proposal for “red bases,” even if they required a specialized *ceto politico* in charge of defending them, indicated the existence of an area of *autonomia* which used violence as its mode of engagement, but not for the seizure of power. The decidedly “defensive” use of such violence within Negri’s “red brigades” contrasted with the understanding of violence held by the Feltrinelli-influenced anti-imperialist groups. These anti-imperialist groups, together with the pro-partisan factions of the PCI and some of the Maoist groups, defended a specialized and militarized resistance that would be capable of meeting the state’s violence on similar terms.

The “real” Red Brigades, the proto-military organization that famously came to embody the militarized position over the following decades, were at that point a fairly unknown armed group that followed a “movementist” line, closer to *operaismo*. However, their absorption of the pro-Feltrinelli factions in the early to mid-70s quickly turned them into a highly structured and hierarchical military organization, one which would increasingly distance itself ever more tensely<sup>16</sup> from the rest of *autonomia*<sup>17</sup> through its several attempts at being recognized by the state as legitimate political combatants.<sup>18</sup>

The resurgence of factory struggles in 1973 led to a further split within these positions on violence. The occupation of Mirafiori by its workers turned Italy’s biggest and most important factory into a “inexpugnable proletarian citadel”<sup>19</sup> for days at a time. This

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<sup>15</sup> Antonio Negri, “Il Partito Operaio Contro il Lavoro” (1973), 104.

<sup>16</sup> See the second volume of Negri’s biography for an account of his conflicts with the Red Brigades while in prison. Antonio Negri, *Galeria e Esilio*, (Rome: Ponte alle Grazie. 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Renato Curcio, one of the Red Brigade’s leaders, would years later affirm their complete separation from the ‘77 movement.

<sup>18</sup> The famous kidnapping and murder of ex-prime minister Aldo Moro, which Negri was at one point a suspect of having orchestrated, is often considered to be the Red Brigades attempt to secure state recognition as a legitimate interlocutor. Lucio Magri, one of the members of *Il Manifesto* and the parliamentary expressions of *operaismo*, considers that if that had come to pass then a fusion would have occurred between the more radical areas of *autonomia* and the red brigades. See Magri, Lucio. *Alla Ricerca di un’altro Comunismo*. (Il Saggiatore: 2012 Bologna).

<sup>19</sup> Ballestriini, Nanni & Moroni, Primo (eds.). *L’Orda d’Oro*. Sugarco Edizione. 1988: Milano), 434.

led parts of *Potere Operaio* to declare the “end of the groups” – their vanguard role had become obsolete – and to the formation of an organized *Autonomia Operaia*.

Organized *Autonomia* featured a different subjectivity than the struggles of ‘68. The *operaî* were no longer poor Southern immigrants, but formally educated youth who brought the countercultural, anti-authoritarian and iconoclastic nature of the school and university struggles of ‘68 into the factories. In Negri’s terms, the “mass worker” of the ‘60s had mutated into the “social worker” of the ‘70s. Whereas previous generations of militants held dear the iconography, terminology and mythical status of the socialist workers’ movement and of the resistance, this new generation openly eschewed any ideology concerned with “progress,” “socialism,” “democracy,” and “participation.”

The rupture of the “social worker” with the previous class composition and with the identity traits of the historical workers’ movement expressed itself in the forms of violence it employed. “Mass illegality,” or “appropriation” in Negri’s terms, became the general term for identifying the struggles which made a use of violence that was nevertheless in stark contrast with the military specialization of the Red Brigades. Metropolitan struggles, which by that point had multiplied and spread all over Italy, began to employ a widespread tactic of “auto-reduction” of basic necessities: the full price for transportation and utilities wasn’t paid, but only what was deemed fair (intimidation of public officials and tampering with technical equipment made sure such price was accepted); supermarkets were expropriated, with the goods distributed for free, often in informal markets set up in working class neighbourhoods. The territorial expansion of right-wing militias, then a real threat, was met with armed “proletarian patrols.” Bourgeois cultural events, such as the Opera’s season premiere at Milan’s *La Scala* theatre, were stormed by hundreds of proletarian youths.

The strongest example of *autonomia*’s specific use of violence was the aptly named practice of “territorial control,” where specific proletarian neighbourhoods cut off all road accesses for some hours, giving time for *autonomia*’s militants to loot all of the large supermarkets and distribute their commodities, to attack fascist headquarters, to squat houses, and so on. Of course, these militant structures blatantly refused the hierarchical nature of armed struggle groups, even if such refusal often meant but the tyranny of a formless or charismatic leadership.

The specificity of this type of political action, and its distance from the organized violence of the Red Brigades, reached its apex in 1977, where a new explosion of dissent spread all over the national territory. The police killing of ex-*Lotta Continua* militant Francesco Lorusso in Bologna led to a state-wide insurrection. Bologna's PCI Mayor, along with interior minister Cossiga, had to call in the army to restore order. Huge riots ensued in Rome, with PCI's union (the CGIL) leader Lucio Lama being chased off the Sapienza university by organized *Autonomia* militants. In Milan, demonstrations started to feature the exchange of live fire between militants and police, with the inevitably tragic consequences. This was also the moment when a critique of such violence began to announce itself, as expressed in the famous anecdote involving the looting of guns from gun stores in Rome and Bologna, which were then hung from tram lines like Christmas decorations, affirming both the capacity to use guns and the decision not to do so.

It was here that the question of the party became more pertinent. The proto-insurrectionary situation begged for a centralizing structure capable of systematizing all subversive efforts, while at the same time positioning them at the forefront of the workers' movement and challenging the PCI's hegemonic role. The theories and proposals around the formation of such a party were varied and contradictory and were furthermore regarded with suspicion from the area of *autonomia*—and thus the opportunity was lost.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of the '70s, the ever-greater intensification of violence, repression and despair had pushed more and more militants into underground armed struggle, which by then had absorbed most of the creative energy of *autonomia*, effectively creating unbreachable splits amidst its tendencies.

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<sup>20</sup> See Steven Wright, "A Party of Autonomy?" *Libcom.org*, 2005, last accessed January 5, 2019, <https://libcom.org/library/party-autonomy-steve-wright>.

## II. Friendship, territory, and class

Contrary to the commonplace classification of the “years of lead,” which subsumes this problematic of violence under a single event as a political deviation,<sup>21</sup> there were several different problematics within the question of violence. The outline of two different tendencies—one “movementist”, the other “sovereigntist”—sheds light on this problematic, but runs the risk of missing the true nature of their divergences and encounters, which, for the most part, is still historically enshrouded by the lingering fog of war. However, within this tentative it is possible to start outlining what in this ordeal was specific to the Italian situation.

Tronti’s and, to a lesser extent, Negri’s refusal of mediation and their affirmation of a fundamental antagonism between class and capital seem to echo and amplify a concept of the political that is akin to Carl Schmitt’s, even if they grounded it in fundamentally different social categories. Tronti would embrace Schmitt’s influence, even to the point of titling a chapter in his 1992 *Political al Tramonto* “Karl [Marx] und Carl [Schmitt].” Negri, however, would later unconvincingly refuse it,<sup>22</sup> as it was tentatively present in his open Leninism.

As we’ve seen before, by establishing two opposing fields—friend and enemy—Schmitt defines a notion of political as the antagonistic action that both wage in order to curtail and nullify each other’s power.<sup>23</sup> The war between friend and enemy does not unfold as a moral, aesthetic, religious, or cultural opposition (lest they themselves become political categories), nor does it imply despise or contempt. On the contrary, their opposition emerges out of the incompatibility of their forms of life, on how opposing ethical structures find themselves confined to a same territory or compete over the same goal. Inasmuch as this description accurately expresses how Tronti and others perceived the class conflict at hand, a fundamental difference arises in that Schmitt maintains that

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<sup>21</sup> See Alex Callinicos’ review of Negri’s *Marx Beyond Marx*. Alex Callinicos, “The Mask of Anarchy,” *Socialist Worker Review*, [No. 78](#), July/August 1985, 32.

<sup>22</sup> See Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

the distinction is necessarily grounded in a concept of the state. While this state can assume manifold historical and social forms, Schmitt nevertheless views it as the necessary framework for any community that wishes to uphold a political power. The identity between “state” and “people,” or between state and community is, as we’ve seen, also present in Schmitt’s “State, Movement, People,” where he makes his ideological commitments very explicit: the totalitarian state seems to be the only one capable of rescuing the true nature of the political from “liberal democracy,” and hence of restoring the ontological correspondence between the ethical community and its political expression.

*Operaismo* took up the friend/enemy distinction within a new configuration and accorded with the view that “liberal democracy” (here understood as *Neocapitalismo*) did in fact entail a totalitarian de-politicization of society. However, the friend/enemy distinction was not used to frame inter-state conflict, but the conflict between state power and the forces of its undoing. How is the friend/enemy distinction maintainable in this transformation? The delineation of the opposing fields seems more complex here, as one can neither understand the community of workers without capital, nor can one conceive of capital solely through its personifications (the capitalists, the managers, the politicians, the police, and so forth). Conceptually, within *operaismo*, and politically, within the area of *autonomia*, the category of friendship must be thoroughly defined against the state and beyond existing normative relations. That is, friendship must be thought beyond law and norm as a social relation that is thoroughly unsubsumable. For if the friend/enemy distinction no longer defines forms of life in terms of their political institutions, but is instead used to grasp an antagonistic form of life and its subsumption, then the change of terms alters both poles of the distinction. The inimical form of life (here, capital) is now but a systematic logic and, as such, one’s own form of life can no longer be determined from the institutions which would merely uphold such logic. Friend versus enemy not as state versus state, but as state versus non-state.

Friendship, as a form of the partisan *Gemeinwesen* discussed before, must avoid all the hypostatizations expressed in Schmitt’s repertoire of forms of the state (“a machine or organism, a person or an institution, a society or a community, an enterprise



or a beehive”<sup>24</sup>). This is because friendship is precisely the social relation which is never directly legislated upon. Most capitalist cooperative relations of production are thoroughly subsumed in normative systems (in business and labour law, in the multiple forms of collective legal existence, from the club to the association, etcetera). Familiar and romantic relationships also find plenty of their expressions upheld in law (such as marriage and divorce, family law, and so forth) but friendship itself is never present as such in any code of law.

This gigantic absence is, of course, nowhere more evident than in the fact that the state itself presumes to function as the highest expression of such affiliation and that it ideologically promotes itself as such, as hypostatizing in law the complexity of the social relations between its people. Once this function of the state is redeployed under *neo-capitalismo*, as an apparatus of real subsumption and its totalization of society, then the category of friendship becomes the only remainder of free association. Consequently, if friendship in these terms can only express itself through a rupture with law, then it is inherently violent, and, vice versa, such violence inherently implies the constitution of friendship. *Autonomia*’s use of violence thoroughly relies on the perception that all relations of closeness, complicity and comradeship are in themselves already an expression of the violence that rules the processes of inclusion and exclusion from the state, as seen—for instance—in Alquati’s description of “invisible organization.”

This opens a further series of considerations on Schmitt’s notion of the political, and consequently on its resurgence within *operaismo*. If Schmitt’s notion of the political through the friend/enemy relation is contingent on the capacity of a form of life to hypostatize its political institutions, then it is necessary to determine the relation between this form of life and its political institutions. Schmitt assumes this relationship to be “natural”—hence his inherent conservatism—but the problem does not disappear if this relationship is mediated by social institutions. For if we view the relation between a community’s form of life and its political institutions in terms of social relations of production, the institutional and bureaucratized notion of the political reappears within the friend/enemy distinction, and threatens to absorb everything in its path. This is the role played by Negri’s concept of self-valorization and his theory of the party.

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<sup>24</sup> Schmitt, Carl. *The concept of the political* (University of Chicago Press: 2007 Chicago). 19.

The question of violence in *autonomia* fully fits within this problematic. Once the violence of the “invisible organization” becomes conscious of itself and emerges as a pole of “friendship,” it also starts to tremble, inasmuch as it needs to both assume and reject institutionalization. Within institutions it risks alienating the coherence of its form of life, without them it risks never truly emerging as such.

*Operaismo*, the theory of the *operai* as a political friendship inimical to capital, then already presupposed the contradictory categories around which it would later split as *autonomia*: on the one hand, organization through the constitution of a *ceto politico*, on the other hand, dissolution through exile.

Exile is, of course, a spatial concept. The specificity of the Italian experience vis-à-vis other experiences of its time is defined by a perception of antagonism that is fundamentally spatial and territorial. The spatial disposition of capital’s command over labour is thoroughly theorized by *operaismo* both through Tronti’s description of the metropolitan expansion of productive discipline, as well as by Alquati’s inquiry into the meshes of resistance built throughout the urban sphere. Negri’s analysis of the metropolis as a site of production follows through with these intuitions. Class antagonism hinges on a conflict over the space of social reproduction, over the *de facto* command of any given territory. Such spatial conflict is obviously immediately violent, as opposing wills dispute territorial control and organize themselves around the specificities of the terrain. But the terrain is shared, unlike in conventional warfare. For sovereign control over it is never really contested, except momentarily, and the territory cannot be easily divided amidst the opposing factions. Rather, their layers of territorial command overlap, with the evident ensuing clashes. The apparatuses of sovereign command are disrupted, interrupted, attacked, and sabotaged: commodities are collectivized, reproductive expenses are refused (pressuring capital’s profits); the sovereign monopoly on the use of violence is disputed; the symbolic spatial organization of the city collapses.

Carl Schmitt describes this spatial dimension of contemporary political struggles in the *Theory of the Partisan* (1962). The political intensity of the partisan form of life is grounded in its telluric, or territorial immersion, in how the partisan is always part of an ontological relation between the “land” and its “people.” In Schmitt’s political framework,

as we've previously seen in "State, Movement, People," such telluric intensity confirms the relation between the "nature" of a people and the political structures it can generate. The mythical nature of antifascist resistance played on these themes, on being the continuation of the historical process of Italy's unification (something fascism also claimed to be) and the expression of a true Italian-socialist manifest destiny. Schmitt's *Theory of the Partisan*, however, also foresees the eclipse of this telluric grounding, inasmuch as technological development forcibly breaks up any such ontological spatial relationship— the omnipresence of control sabotages the essential relation between land, people and the opacity of the terrain. Schmitt's perspective is transposable into contrasting terms that question his conservative metaphysical implications while grasping what's pertinent about them: real subsumption eroded the social relations that had earlier determined two clearly defined opposing territories (such as they were defined by the wars of imperialism and colonialism) and instead sets antagonism at the level of civil war, where neither side can truly claim a territory as their own. Likewise, technological command over the territory overcomes the partisan swiftness and invisibility of action. Schmitt's theory of the partisan is at the same its tacit eulogy, in that its historical period was drawing to a close.

Even so, if such telluric attunement is to be understood relationally rather than ontologically, then this inability of sovereignty to possess absolute command over the totality of the territory in civil war cannot be understood in terms of opposing two telluric forces, but rather two modes of inhabiting the territory: one grasps it, organizes it, and systematizes in order to develop grids of control and valorization (the contested sovereign), and the other undoes this grasp through the creation of zones of opacity (the partisan). The clash between the two does not come as a clash between sovereign forces, between mirroring might, organized along similar claims, but on the contrary, through opposed modes of doing and undoing. Schmitt's telluric ontology of the partisan rests not on an essential relation between blood and soil, on contrary, it rests on a particular spatial relation with the territory—one which *autonomia* sought to build for itself. In this sense, then, the violence deployed by *autonomia*, for the most part, is to be understood as topological.

Alquati's description of the relation between wildcat struggles and metropolitan proletarian social relations, mentioned earlier, illustrates this sense of partisanship. His

theory of an “invisible organization” looming in the interstices of the metropolitan sprawl is, potentially, also a theory of a non-sovereign violence, of a violence not based on command over a territory but on the limits of such command.

This spatial and territorial condition however also sheds light on the problematic between institutionalization and exile. If the use of violence is based on partisan territoriality, that is, as an answer to the problems and necessities raised by rooting oneself in a space, then the practical questions of organization no longer depend on abstract forms of institutionalization. Organization here is not the hypostatization of a “friendship,” its symbolic form of appearance as it is with the state; rather, friendship is here a tactical apparatus.

This spatial dimension obviously wasn’t invented in the *Quaderni Rossi* or by the Italian *operai*—it is a part of any account of violent conflict. But there is a decision in *autonomia* to develop it as such and to attempt to conceptualize it within categories of autonomy, such as mass illegality, appropriation, sabotage, and red bases. Such conceptual work illustrates the need to develop an account of violence that stands against proto-sovereign conceptions of armed struggle that organizes it within increasingly hierarchized and separated structures. For if one can understand a use of violence that is fundamentally opposed to sovereignty because it is non-specialized and emerges out of a shared territorial condition, then one will be better able to avoid the pitfalls of institutionalised bureaucracies.

Inasmuch as friendship and territory are essential features of *autonomia*, this implies the ontologization of violence as it becomes the condition of possibility for their apprehension. Political violence, from the mythical 1962 Piazza Statuto worker’s riots to 1977’s insurrection, was taken in each instance as a sign of deeper transformations within class composition. But more than this, such violence was also a rite of passage<sup>25</sup> in which these new class compositions acknowledged themselves as powerful subjects capable of building a proletarian politics. *Operaismo* and *autonomia*’s literature, for the most part, does not seek to justify violence morally. Workers aren’t victims whose

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<sup>25</sup> Tronti claims in *Noi, Operaisti* that “Piazza Statuto was our *bildungsroman*.” See “Our Operaismo” *New Left Review* 73, January-February 2012 pp. 119-139

violence needs moral justification; instead, they are “serious people: a class of producers.”<sup>26</sup> Violence does not play an instrumental role within a broader play of forces. Rather, it embodies the promise of immediacy, as it is capable of affirming the class’ power as it cuts through the mediating structures of capital. This is because this violence was for the most part directed against things and against structures that seemingly escape the moral question of violence between subjects. Negri’s claim that the class struggles against capital and not against the bourgeoisie fundamentally alters the nature of the violence of class struggle. For in this light, violence is not a relation between two parties, but an existential condition, that is, a condition of the existence of proletarian power.

In this sense, Tronti’s *Operai e Capitale* reads as an epistemology of this class violence: “only those who hate can truly know.”<sup>27</sup> This class hate is the condition of possibility of a proletarian knowledge, which is a knowledge of a violence that is carried out in antagonism. Tronti’s “primacy of struggles” is such an ontology of violence, as it provides the condition of possibility for any further program.

In *operaismo*, violence as also emerges as a condition of possibility for the class itself. If, as Tronti claimed, “class” only materializes when the forces of production are split between a passive labour force and an antagonistic class, then the material reality of the class depends on the violent gesture. Tronti’s “Copernican turn” does not merely seek to invert the dialectical causality of class struggle—to see first class and then capital. It also seeks to invert the essentialist grounding of Schmitt’s political ontology of friend and enemy: community does not ground the political, rather, it is the friend-enemy distinction that enables the integrity of any collective identity. Likewise, Negri, as I’ve showed before, would follow this line in his reading of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, where he outlines a theory of antagonism and tendency as enabling conditions for communism. The method of the tendency, mentioned in chapter II, fully illustrates this claim: the moment of most intense conflict both determines the contradictions of the entire logical structure and thus makes them intelligible.

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<sup>26</sup> Tronti, “il Piano del capitale” (1963). In *Operai e Capitale* (1967). (Rome: Derive Approdi: 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Tronti, “Linea di Condotta” (1967). In *Operai e Capitale* (1967). (Rome: Derive Approdi: 2007).

This understanding of violence contrasts with how violence is understood by most Marxist traditions. While the post-war PCI had fully assumed the program of peaceful transition that had been, if not in theory, then in practice, dominant over most of the workers' movement's history, *operaismo* and *autonomia* challenged Engels' claim that violence was merely a secondary aspect of the development of productive relations. Violence carried no historical significance of its own and was hence subordinate to relations of production: conquerors and victors adapted to dominant productive relations<sup>28</sup> and history moved through their inner dialectical developments, not through the use of force (something Marx wouldn't be quite so sure of at times, as in his 1859 address to the Communist League, where he suggests the idea of a "revolution in permanence"<sup>29</sup>). In this sense, violence may express imminent social transformations, however, it cannot foster them or make them come to be. Likewise, capital's social relations of command and domination do occur through the violence of exploitation and alienation, but this is a force mostly enacted through economic relations, rather than through the use of explicit force, which is an exception rather than the norm. Violence, in this framework, is understood as an accessory to the dialectical development of history, and, as such, does not warrant a systematic critique, as this would risk making the rejection of capitalist relations hinge on the immorality of the use of force rather than on the irrationality of exploitation. Social relations partially unfold by means of violence, but alienation and exploitation are the primary forms of domination in capitalist society; and where bodily violence is carried out, it is done so for sake of maintaining the relations of production. Such instrumental use of violence by a teleology of production is evidently at odds with *operaismo*, where the excessive simplicity of the parable would be incapable of accounting for the true unfolding of the relations of production, and to the fact that production itself isn't a neutral term, but one determined by capital's relation of command itself.

The positions of *operaismo* and *autonomia* reveal themselves to be even more nuanced when they are contrasted with those that give organized violence a central role in advancing social transformation. Their general argument partly originates in positions

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<sup>28</sup> See for example, Chapter 2 of the second part of Engels' *Anti-Dühring*.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Marx, "Address to the Communist League" (1850), *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 303-312.

that Marx stood against—Bakunin’s and Blanqui’s, for example—and advocates the revolutionary use of violence by a well-organized minority that would be able to leverage political transformations. Marx and Engels<sup>30</sup> criticize this on the basis of its separation from the material reality of class and the historical development of capitalism. However, in the *Manifesto* and in his address to 1872 Hague Congress, Marx would argue for the impossibility of peaceful transition and the necessity of violently overthrowing capital. Yet even if one finds grounds for violent revolution in Marx, its actual concretization would raise a number of questions that shaped the workers’ movement after Marx’s death. These concerned not only strategic considerations of the goals and objectives of violence, but moral quandaries as well: what are the legitimate means of revolution, what targets of violence are legitimate, what is the difference between oppressive and revolutionary violence, etcetera.

Even after the historical experiences of proletarian forms of sovereignty in the Paris Commune and the Russian revolution, a technical question concerning violence remained: who was to accomplish the revolution, and how? The proletariat was tasked with an emancipatory endeavour that would not only put a stop to its plight but also put it at the helm of a coming society. Yet even if its moral claim to such leadership was legitimate, two questions remained. First, which segment of the class (industrial workers, peasants, etcetera) will have the power and the will to enact a revolution? And second, which class institutions will be capable of not only carrying out the complex task of overturning the state, but also the even more complicated task of upholding a revolutionary power?

*Operaismo*, at least in its dominant Trontian-Negrian aspects, stands with the Marxist traditions that affirm the necessity of revolutionary violence rather than those that envision the transition to communism as a lengthy, complex yet ultimately peaceful

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<sup>30</sup> This Marxian position on violence is quite explicit in his 1856 speech on the anniversary of a workers’ newspaper in London: “Steam, electricity and self-acting mules were revolutionists of a rather more dangerous character than Berbés, Raspail, and Blanqui.” Marx, *Selected Writings*. However, Marx’s relation with Blanqui was more complex than might appear. See Peter Hallward, “Blanqui and Marx,” *Jacobin Magazine*, 2017, [jacobinmag.com/2017/06/blanqui-marx-french-revolution-paris-commune-jacobins](https://jacobinmag.com/2017/06/blanqui-marx-french-revolution-paris-commune-jacobins). For a thorough account of Marx’s turbulent relationship with Bakunin, see Wolfgang Echhardt, *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin and Marx in the First International* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).

transition. Its Leninism consists in seeking revolutionary organizational forms for the industrial working class, namely, soviets—even if it understood the need to continuously modify and update these forms in the revolutionary process. And yet, simultaneously, *operaismo* also followed Rosa Luxemburg’s defence of workers’ spontaneity and independence vis-à-vis their institutions in determining the political goals of the class. Going even further, *operaismo* also absorbed (and, in some cases, openly emulated) Mao’s critique of the socialist establishment and of the need to “bomb the headquarters.”

Even so, *operaismo* and *autonomia* also break with these traditions. Its concept of antagonism is set not between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, but between class and capital. This is a more comprehensive concept of antagonism that includes the entire productive, governmental and legislative infrastructure. This extension of the class enemy beyond the personification of capital does not merely follow the sophistication of capital’s domination throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also seeks to account for the shortcomings of previous revolutionary experiences. The terms of revolution as a qualitative rupture become more complicated, since a successful revolution cannot simply consist in taking ownership of the means of production, but must also carefully distinguish between what must be abolished and what must be preserved and upheld in the course of revolution. In other words, it is not enough for a communist revolution to merely expropriate the expropriators; communist revolutionaries must crack the political and philosophical riddle of splitting the terms of the *aufhebung* by attempting to isolate a principle of abolition from that of upholding.

As a qualitative rupture, revolutionary violence cannot be understood as a merely instrumental increment in force.<sup>31</sup> It involves a metaphysical problem concerning the split between its constituent and constituted forms. If revolutionary violence is not a means of struggling for command of a common, disputed object (the constituted society of collective ownership of the means of production), but is rather a way of interrupting command, then the principle of such violence lies not in its objective aim but in the subjective emergence of workers’ autonomy, that is, in their constituent power. However,

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<sup>31</sup> Hannah Arendt’s *On Violence* (1970) describes violence as an instrumental increment in force that is wholly distinct from power, violence and many related concepts.



*operaismo* takes this one step further, reading the moments of constituent and constituted power together: the moment of collective organization for violence is already a moment of the constitution of class autonomy. And yet, the question persists: is the true measure of revolutionary violence its capacity to undo command, or rather, its capacity to uphold a new power?

This perspective is certainly close to Franz Fanon's in that violence in itself is a process rather than an instrument; it is an expression of the intensification and acceleration of history. But a substantial difference appears once again. In Fanon, violence occurs as a threshold of humanization, as an unapologetic claim to dignity that, as such, is also constitutional. However, it is linked to a project of sovereignty that is openly problematized in *operaismo*. Even if violence grounds a clear dimension of subjectivation and emancipation, this process could never be realized in an institution, nor would they in any fashion be connected to a form of citizenship.

Negri's concern that *autonomia* would degenerate into "terrorism", into a politics of armed action that would prioritize such epistemology of violence over a broader problematic of antagonism and refusal, which were indeed capable of assuming manifold forms, fails to see, willingly or not, how such hypothesis is woven in *autonomia's* concept of violence in itself, for once it assumes such transcendental role there is little to stop it doing so. That Negri, and others, attempt to stabilize *autonomia's* explosive nature through advancing abstract concepts such as self-valorization and such formal solutions as the hypothetical party of *autonomia* did in fact have the opposite effect – for once such violence found a concrete historical substance around which to rally it fully assumed such its self-sufficient autonomy.

### III. The area of *autonomia*: inside/outside/on the margins

The distinctive elements of *autonomia's* use of violence also distinguish its novel understanding of political action. Above, I sought to delineate three distinct features of *autonomia* as it concerns violence: the redeployment of the political friend/enemy distinction in affirming the existence of class subjectivity against its objective subsumption by capital, the spatial problematization of power, and the affirmation of revolutionary violence as a qualitative rupture. However, these elements not only

address a problematic of action that is broader than the question of violence, but they also inform the developments of the area of *autonomia* and how it came to understand itself.

The critique of institutional representation and the *ceto politico* came from areas of the movement that, in one way or the other, refused both a centralized direction and the proto-Leninism of organized *Autonomia*. Its relevance does not come, however, from a *tout court* rejection of the idea of vanguard, since, as we've seen, this form is inherent to the problematic of the movement. Instead, the relevance of the critique of political representation lies in the manifold ways in which these critiques sought to understand the relation between *autonomia*'s processes of destitution—the way it attempted to dismantle apparatus of command and control—and the political and proto-institutional forms that it tentatively created. Here, the existence of *class power*, the challenge of *territorial antagonism*, and the qualitative rupture of *revolutionary violence* are the transcendental categories through which the area of *autonomia* comes into its own.

Some of the currents that emerged out of the critique of representation were collectively known as creative *autonomia*, also called “desiring *autonomia*”, in order to clearly distinguish them from organized *Autonomia*. Implicit in this distance, in Franco “Bifo” Berardi's words,<sup>32</sup> was a refusal of the “already archaeological discussions on organization, the party, the communist revolution, and so on<sup>33</sup> (...) [T]he clear intention is to get rid of the Leninist model of political vanguards and instead to go through with the collectivization of daily life, with the proliferation of the micro-political experiences of self-organizing.”<sup>34</sup>

Like organized *Autonomia*, creative *autonomia* rejected Leninism's orthodox understanding of the party still present in the post-'68 extra-parliamentary formations, with their “mouldy institutions” and “gradualism.” But this rejection also implied a refusal of the social mores and roles of militancy, which were still bound to a “political” dimension that accepted the terms of struggle dictated by the capitalist social relations—

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<sup>32</sup> Franco “Bifo” Berardi: ex-Potere Operaio militant, creative *autonomia*'s charismatic leader.

<sup>33</sup> Bifo, “la specificita desiderante nel movimento dell'autonomia,” in Bianchi, Sergio e Caminiti, Franco. *Gli Autonomi vol. 1*. (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2007), 290.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

wages, workers' institutions, and so on. *Operaismo*'s legacy, embodied in organized *Autonomia*, focused on building an autonomous movement which would, in the end, be capable of influencing and eventually leading the PCI and the "left" in general. Here, on the contrary, the divorce between autonomy and the lingering institutions of the workers' movement would be total. As *A/traverso*, the journal most readily associated with creative *autonomia*, claimed: "the movement has gone way beyond politics: it assumes a dimension of radical estrangement. It doesn't have a score to settle with this state: the sphere of institutional politics is too miserable, as is the fight with this state over the wealth developed by this subject in movement."<sup>35</sup>

Instead, creative *autonomia* located the most significant expression of antagonism in the counterculture and in the existential forms associated with it:

Debauchery, Unbridledness, Party [*festa*].<sup>36</sup> This is the level that the behaviours of workers, youth and women have reached. And if for power this is not politics, it will then be our politics, or whatever we may call it. Appropriation and sensual liberation, transformation of interpersonal relations, these are the ways through which we rebuild a project against industrial labour, against any order based on exploitation.<sup>37</sup>

The aesthetic and communicative dimensions of the struggles took on an existential significance that was already tangentially present in *operaismo*. The personal and collective experience of freedom from social constraints and the urgency to materialize new creative and communicative forms determined a space of action and organization beyond that of the political group. Instead of factory committees and neighbourhood assemblies, creative *autonomia* formed media collectives that abandoned the idea of taking over power to focus instead on the possibility of escaping from it. The corollary of this position was the *A/traverso* claim, in 1977, that "the revolution is over, we've won," and the proposal for a movement of "barefoot engineers" that would be able to connect technology and science in "autonomous zones."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *A/Traverso* quoted in Bianchi, Sergio and Caminiti, Franco. *Gli Autonomi vol. 1*. (Derive Approdi: 2007. Rome), 291.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

This wasn't so much a refusal of Leninism, at least not along the lines that Leninism had been refused by the ultra-left or by anarchism, but an attempt to separate the practice of the militant vanguard from its opposite conceptual pole, the masses. If the "masses" no longer existed as passive workers or as depoliticized "people," then the vanguard was a boundless, open term that was free to explore its own mediations. Whereas Negri and organized *Autonomia* sought to develop the autonomization of the vanguard in political terms through an assault on power, Bifo and *A/Traverso* would find their impetus within the development of an autonomous media capable of expressing the realities of the movement.

This kind of position wasn't exclusive to the emerging creative class or to university students, nor was it bound to a fascination with new information technologies. These "existential" demands, coupled with a refusal of militancy that nevertheless was fiercely antagonistic to the state, emerged in different forms throughout the different territorial realities of the movement. In Milan, from the mid-'70s onwards, a diffuse network of small collectives called the *Proletarian Youth Circles* was formed, gathering hundreds of young militants lost halfway through precarious labour, unemployment, petty-marginality and school. The widespread practices of "auto-reduction" and "proletarian expropriation" were directed towards new habits of leisure and consumption (movie theatres, concerts, youth culture, etcetera), often associated with widespread squatting initiatives. This developed the aforementioned territorial aspect of *autonomia* into a set of cohesive problematics and practices. These circles also refused the militant morality associated with formal groups and politics. They based their demands and repertoire on their immediate needs and circumstances rather than any distant demand for wages in jobs they didn't have. Their mobilization came to a bloody climax in 1976, when the attempt to invade the premiere of the opera season at the *La Scala* theater ended in a violent confrontation with the police. It sent hundreds to the hospital and accelerated the transition to armed struggle that would destroy the movement a few years later.

The existential refusal of militancy was developed more systematically in the post-councilist currents close to Camatte and Cesarano, as we saw in the previous chapter. The *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia* generation of militants formed not only *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua*, but also a succession of situationist inspired groups: *Ludd*,

*Consigli Proletari*, *Organizzazione Consigliare*, and then finally *Comontismo* (a play on “common” and “ontology”, taken after *Gemeinwesen*).

The councilist theoretical reference was mostly ideological and did not attempt to create workers’ councils (since, for the most part, most factory committees were much closer to *Potere Operaio* than to any other organization). The terms set forth by Pannakoek<sup>39</sup> years before, where workers’ councils would unseat the Leninist vanguard party as the true proletarian revolutionary agency, were in fact criticized as real subsumption had destroyed workers’ identity as a possible basis of class spontaneity. But *Comontismo* succeeded in developing a vision of what the modern expression of workers’ councils could be. Although not rooted in student life and with a distinctly Hegelian background (at odds with *autonomia*’s anti-Hegelian orthodoxy), *Ludd/Comontismo* developed a rejection of militancy and formal organization that wasn’t rooted in the immediacy of partisanship or use, but in the dialectical unfolding of consciousness. As an anonymous text puts it:

Ludd’s critique was grounded in recognizing consciousness (consciousness of objective possibilities) as an inseparable moment of praxis, as a subject of praxis, and as such, as irreconcilable with any separation (consciousness/proletariat, party/masses, economy/politics). That meant setting the proletariat at the centre of the movement leading to totality, negating through praxis all fictitious moments that emerge from partiality (vanguards and parties).<sup>40</sup>

This critique of partisanship was openly at odds with *operaismo*’s basic tenets and with any subsequent theory of the party. *Comontismo* openly questioned the institutional tactics of *operaismo* and organized *Autonomia*, its semi-covert, perhaps delusional, conspiracy to control the PCI, as well as the discipline and quasi-military structure of a lot of the extra-parliamentary left, etcetera. Against all this, *Comontismo*,

didn’t recognize any other praxis or end than that of pleasure, consciously lived and organized, necessarily antithetical to reification and survival, [this] community of action

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<sup>39</sup> See Anton Pannakoek, *Workers’ Councils* (Oakland: AK Press. 2002).

<sup>40</sup> Anonymous, “Note de preistorie contemporane,” last accessed May 28, 2020, [nelvento.net/archivio/68/isocluddcom/comontismo/note2.htm](http://nelvento.net/archivio/68/isocluddcom/comontismo/note2.htm).

isn't in any way conducive to former councilist organizations and, because of that, isn't reducible to the empty fetish of the thousand ways in which they were used (such as the indiscriminate and instrumental use of the councilist thesis by all the traditional left, from the PSI to *Potere Operaio*). (...) On the contrary, when the community of action is set as way of life, within the entirety of daily life, in a perspective where every partiality, every separation between subjective and objective, between theory and praxis, between subversive essence and global revolution, tends to resolve itself dialectically, then it becomes (...) the most complete expression of the coming "human class" (historical heir to the revolutionary proletariat), negating capital and the dominion of things over men.<sup>41</sup>

Such positions obviously refused *Potere Operaio*'s and organized *Autonomia*'s vanguardism. *Comontisti* lived "in the conviction that if everyone subjectively realized communism (...) that would have immediately meant objective communism, the human community of being."<sup>42</sup> The infrastructural accumulation of territorial power, rather than a measure of counterpower, was taken to be the condition of possibility for this "subjective realization of communism."

There is a side of *Comontismo* that best illustrates, even if almost as caricature, the specificity of *autonomia*'s relation to violence, namely, the way its framework led to an appraisal of crime as the sole true revolutionary praxis:

Crime is not merely a product of society: it starts being its negation. Crime is not only the critique of capital's fictitious community; it is the start of the affirmation of the real human community. (...) the risk of jail or death is today the only true adventure of life. (...) Outlaws are the only true modern revolutionaries. (...) In all truth, no struggle against prisons makes sense if it's not a struggle against law: the struggle against law is the necessary basis for the destruction of the existing order. (...) the end of any social role is the end of any possible prison.<sup>43</sup>

If today we can find only satirical value in the claim that emancipation is exclusively based on crime, its contrived "radicality" of its author is in fact very revealing. By giving equal value to the existential dimensions of the post-'68 groups (their refusal of politics),

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Vallerio Bertelo, "Comontismo," 2007, last accessed May 28, 2020, [marxoltremarx.it/comontismo.html](http://marxoltremarx.it/comontismo.html).

<sup>43</sup> Comontismo. Flyer, Date unknown, [criticaradicale.nautilus-autoproduzioni.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/lottacriminale.jpg](http://criticaradicale.nautilus-autoproduzioni.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/lottacriminale.jpg).

*operaismo*'s appraisal of the marginal and informal social spheres, and the violent refusal of the law, *Comontismo* revealed the desire to think violence beyond the terms of sovereignty and of establishment of a new law.

Even if it possessed many brazen discrepancies between itself and any established *operaismo*, *Comontismo* outlined a series of potential ramifications springing from *operaismo* that the Trontian-Negrian orthodoxy sought to obliterate throughout this period. When seen beyond the heavy burden of its *pro-situ* jargon, the area of *Comontismo* opens a series of questions which are key to understanding *autonomia* as a whole, particularly that of the role of singular experience in antagonism.

This dimension is overtly evident in the Italian feminist currents of the period. The women's movements of 1970s Italy cannot be reduced to *operaismo*, *autonomia*, or even to the events of 1968. The feminist movement emerged across every political and social spectrum and thoroughly transformed the country. Those parts that did arise from the experiences of the '68 groups and from the general countercultural *milieu* came into their own through a critique of the chauvinism of militancy and activism. They developed a critique of organized *Autonomia* that set the tone for those sketched above. The possibility of grasping "the movement" as a social form that did not view itself exclusively in political terms derives in great measure from the critiques of the feminist movement that eventually appeared in *autonomia*'s journals.

The "autonomist" critiques of social reproduction carried out by Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati and Maria Rosa della Costa are well known; but they are first and foremost theoretical developments that ran parallel to *operaismo*, much like one can say that "autonomist" Marxism is a theoretical current somewhat removed from the area of *autonomia* itself. Other currents, like *Rivolta Femminile*, broadly known as *the feminism of difference*, were closer to *autonomia*'s political practices than to the development of the Marxian core of *operaismo*.

From the mid-sixties on, several women's groups engaged in "self-consciousness" practices: gender exclusive discussion groups where their lives, problems, perspectives and intimacy were discussed through a collective practice of verbalization and listening, not bound to any necessity of action or theoretical production. Assemblies and meetings

didn't aim to produce positions or decide actions, but to build a collective performativity, capable of a common subjectivation. As Carla Lonzi, a militant and theoretical leader of *Rivolta Femminile*, writes:

[The practice of self-consciousness] operates through an *irruption to subjectivity* [*scatto a sogetto*] of women, which together recognize themselves as complete human beings, no longer dependent on men's approval. (...) To become aware that any attachment to the masculine world is the true obstacle to their own liberation makes the consciousness of self irrupt [*scattare*] amidst women; and the unexpectedness of this situation reveals unknown horizons to its expansion. (...) Feminism is the discovery and actualization of the *birth into subjectivity* that has been subjugated to the myth of realization in romantic union with those in power.<sup>44</sup>

That the process of becoming a subject takes place only within the space of such an adamant rupture openly challenges the idea of and socio-historical becoming. Carla Lonzi's *Let's Spit on Hegel* (1974), named after a line in *Rivolta Femminile*'s collective manifesto, claimed that abstract categories such as "equality," "history," "revolution," and "universality" were the products of a patriarchal world where women had no place:

Equality is a juridical principle. (...) Difference is an existential principle that concerns the modes of being human, the peculiarity of one's goals, possibilities, and one's sense of self in a given situation and in the situation one wants to create for himself. (...) Woman's difference is her millennial absence from history. Let us profit from this difference, for once we have been included in society how many more centuries will have to pass before we can throw off this new yoke? The task of subverting the order of the patriarchal structure cannot be left to others. Equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonized people.<sup>45</sup>

For Lonzi, the Marxist reading of Hegel's master-slave relation characterizes power relations between men, but it is not sufficient for the concept of patriarchy. It may help one understand how men overcome their differences in the progressive improvement of their social relations, but it does not address women, who remain an "adjunct to the reproduction of humanity, bound with divinity or left on the threshold of the animal

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<sup>44</sup> Carla Lonzi, "Significato dell'Autocoscienza nei Gruppi Femministi," *Rivolta Femminile*, 1972.

<sup>45</sup> Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Milano: Et al, 1970), 10



world.”<sup>46</sup> As such, revolutionary theory—here understood in the most teleological and gradualist interpretation possible—also excluded women.

*Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti* <sup>47</sup> [*Don't Believe You Have Any Rights*] is a collectively written text that was published in 1977 by the Milan's Women's Bookshop, a social space organized by feminist self-consciousness groups. The text reflects on the feminist struggles over the previous decade. It fully develops the theory of friendship outlined above as characteristic of *autonomia*'s understanding of its use of violence. It uses the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible, which tells the story of how, after the son of the widowed Ruth died, her daughter-in-law chose to stay with her rather than find a new husband. Feminist self-consciousness groups called that bond between women *affidamento*,<sup>4</sup> or affinity, and they understood its political significance to lay in breaking with the normative structures of command. This gesture was fully consistent with the tone of the movement, as it put forth secessional friendship as a challenge to authority, one that made a partisan break from patriarchy to build a common form of life.

Like *Comontismo* and the Proletarian Youth Circles, feminist self-consciousness groups refused *operaismo*'s practice of tactical reformist demands and their *ceto politico*, refusing any engagement with what were perceived as instances of command.<sup>5</sup> The most radical expression of this stance was refusing any participation in the referendums over abortion rights on the grounds that it was not for the state to legislate over women's bodies, and that any expansion of such juridical command would only mean the further biopolitical subjugation of women.

These feminist groups sought to develop the means and structures for practices of self-consciousness, as well as a critique of the militant repertoire of the larger movement of *autonomia*. *Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti* (1977) quotes an internal discussion document: “We have no doubts regarding the transformational capacity [of this method of organization], as opposed to the politics of mass demonstrations (...) To organize meetings that last for days, to build headquarters, to have places suitable to overcome

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> V.A. *Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti* (1977). (Stiller & Rosenberg: 1987. Milan).

the separation between private and public, is something more subversive than a trumpety demonstration.”<sup>48</sup>

Even if these concepts of estrangement obviously resonate with *operaismo*'s concepts of partisanship, and even if the *opera*i's struggles and the feminism of difference affirm the same critical structure, they have radically different outcomes. The former actively engages frameworks of command through both direct and indirect political dispute. The latter favours exile. Political engagement with the terminology of command is seen as subjugation to its conceptual forms. As such, *autonomia*'s *ceto politico*, its institutions and critical categories, cannot truly escape being categories of subsumption. The immediacy of feminine reproductive labour, however, is different from alienated labour as it had been traditionally conceived within Marxism. This becomes all the more evident as capital begins including it in its process of valorisation. It is from the exception of such immediacy, then, that antagonism can be built. This moment of antagonism is not the *caesura per se*, but the development of a language of silence, one that goes unheard and uncomprehend to those who would subjugate it. Again, quoting comments to *Sottosopra*, an internal bulletin, *Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti* says:

The fantasy of the collective as one, solidarity, keeps many from talking, from taking a stand; [...] passivity towards the collective as resistance to join the game of roles as a speaker. To await the mutual destruction of roles from the exterior. Over the dead bodies of these roles, active existences will come with fair relations between them. [...] The solution is not the shelling of the general headquarters [that was, as some might remember, the Maoist solution] but the rupture of that apparatus.<sup>49</sup>

The statement that "the personal is political,"<sup>50</sup> popularized by the self-consciousness groups shows the first crevices in Negri's *a posteriori* affirmation of *operaismo* as a constituent ontology. Struggles open a field of potency, but the development of this potency is not immune to the reproduction of the power structures

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>50</sup> The expression "the personal is political" comes from Carol Hasnichs' text on women's consciousness groups in "Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation" (1970), a collective pamphlet. See [library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc\\_wlms01039/](http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/wlmpc_wlms01039/).

that they seek to abolish. To fully refuse a dialectical teleology, one cannot presuppose that the development of struggles will necessarily address all of the ways that command engenders itself in oppression. Struggles cannot claim to dwell in an open becoming if they preserve fundamental power structures all along. Lonzi's dismissal of Hegel is debatable, but one can see how it became urgent in the context of the explicit requests from the left that feminist demands be subsumed within a hierarchization of struggles.

The common critical traits emerging throughout the area of *autonomia* challenge the idea of a seamless collection of subjectivities giving form to a comprehensive whole, a “movement of movements” or a proto- “multitude” as it would come to be understood. Likewise, within the area of *autonomia*, it raises the question concerning not only its social form and development, but also the tensions within it. While the legacy of *operaismo* was at times rejected by these currents, the themes it had set forth—autonomy *contra* subsumption—nevertheless did indeed form their basis.

The thread that runs throughout all of these was the existential experience of refusal that necessarily came into conflict with the values of militancy and political organization. The area of *autonomia* served as a petri dish for an experiment with social relations that was bound to question its own limits and contradictions, as well as the divergence between the informal social norms that it invented and the theoretical positions that informed its militancy. Because the movement was already an ephemeral and fragile site of gregarious exile, the problematization of its own social form meant abandoning any solid ground: whereas plenty of workers' struggles in *autonomia* sought to firmly ground themselves in a proletarian identity—albeit one that coincided with its own refusal—the emergence of a militancy that was oriented its refusal around “the movement” overturned the ground of class identity completely.

This is not to diminish *autonomia*'s “existential” dimension in favor of one more directly concerned with shopfloor exploitation. On the contrary, this gesture represented *operaismo*'s own “inversion of the sign,” turning Tronti's Copernican turn back into itself. Struggles came first, yes, but this meant that one couldn't stop at unearthing the activity of class beneath capital: one had to repeat the gesture and dig deeper to find what commands remained buried in what presented itself as antagonism. The existential experience of refusal and militancy opened a field of inquiry and experimentation. This

existential refusal meant not only the experience of the counterculture, the militant *milieu*, and the social life of the movement, but the fundamental experience of antagonism itself, the perceived dissolution of social mores around control and command.

This existential experience of refusal was evident first and foremost in the rejection of militancy and its *ceto politico*, of the normativity of the social discipline of the collectives, of the informal and charismatic power structures, of the petty infighting amidst sects, of the palace maneuvering, of the chauvinistic posturing, and so on. All these behaviors seemed inherently bound to a tired teleological conception of communism, which *operaismo* had begun to dismantle but whose fundamental traits had remained in place, inasmuch as the subjective experience of freedom was still dependent on the conquest of sovereign power. Even if *autonomia*'s leaders claimed that the ongoing struggles were already the actual existence of communism, already the birth of new proletarian institutions, these seemed to fall back upon the representation, negotiation and command that *operaismo* had first criticized—and rightly so.

Against this normative “political” militancy, what was proposed was a militancy carried out as a practice of subjectivation. Lonzi's expression *scatto a suggeto* illustrates the complexity of the proposed operation: *scatto* translates as “sprint,” “dash,” or “impulse.” It connotes an explosive and sudden subjectivation that also carries within it the sense of irrevocable separation. Although one cannot become a subject except by way of mediations, through the objective relations which determine subjectivity, subjectivation occurred here instead through the detachment from and the suspension of apparatuses of command. The immediacy of these subjectivations did not involve becoming, but rather interruption, or destitution. Promiscuity or abstinence, drugs, collective living, aesthetic creation, hedonism, transhumance, collective labour, etcetera, were all understood as breaks with capitalist command capable of collapsing all institutions.

The emergence of an “existential” dimension in Italy's long '68 shouldn't be surprising, even if its mercurial self-reflexivity seemingly contrasts with Tronti's sanguine tirades of the early '60s. Spontaneity, invisibility, antagonism, the autonomization of friendship from the relations of political enmity, the spatial understanding of struggles

and the ontology of rupture all seemingly coalesce around a tentative science and self-narrative of the insurrectional subject. Such an unmediated gaze into oneself obviously risked turning exile into mystified isolation and the immediacy of antagonism into a normative mediation of the clique or the *milieu*.

#### IV. The critique of anti-authoritarian reason

Even if it celebrated itself as a Copernican turn, *operaismo*'s absorption of foreign theoretical influences was vast and far-reaching. Singular among these was the German anti-authoritarian thinker Hans Jurgen Krahel, whose thought became crucial for the unfolding of an *operaismo* capable of understanding the struggles of *autonomia*. Krahel is mostly known as Adorno's *protégé* turned political rival with the onset of the German 1968, in which Krahel played a key role until his early death in 1969. Krahel fully inherited the Frankfurt School's critical and conceptual legacy, reading it, however, through the explosion of new struggles in the German campuses, hence pushing it to the limit where the spontaneous actions of the students clashed with Adorno's pessimism and critique of spontaneism. Their rupture can be summed up in Krahel's critique of critical theory ("the bourgeois organizational form of Critical Theory isn't capable of making program and execution coincide<sup>51</sup>") and in Adorno's denouncement of Krahel's political tactics in his correspondence with Marcuse. The fact that both characters died unexpectedly in the same year leaves their conversation unfinished.

Krahel's published texts, mostly drafts for articles and public presentations, do not address the Italian movement directly; but were quite popular in Italy's more intellectual militant circles. Although employing a different methodology, through different political stakes and ruptures, and within a different context, Krahel's analysis of his own present moment is built according to a structure that is all in all quite similar to the one being thought out in Italy: a critical return to Marx and Lenin through the emergence of new forms of antagonistic subjectivity. Whereas *operaismo* attempts to overcome the limits of the PCI's "vulgar Marxism" through the proverbial refusal of Hegel, Krahel deals with the same issue through a deeper engagement, via Adorno, with the kernel of Hegel's systematic logic. The struggle's intensity and their vertiginous developments meant

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<sup>51</sup> Hans Jurgen Krahel, "Teoria critica e prassi" in *Costituizione e Lotta di Classe* (Milano: Jaca Books, 1972), 316.

these radically different conceptual frameworks could coincide in their claim for new proletarian structures. Krahls reading notes on Lenins major texts read like notes to Negris posterior “33 lessons on Lenin”, discussed in the previous chapter, as both defend that new class compositions demand new collective political forms. One must wonder though how far these paths would maintain their common course had Krahls witnessed the extension of the Italian movement throughout the following decade and finally its demise. Would Krahls accompany Negris optimism or Adornos pessimism?

Although unanswerable as such, the problematic lingering within such question can be tackled through different problems: Krahls texts are in themselves exercises in building the conceptual forms through which a synthetization of the “anti-authoritarian<sup>52</sup>” movement can emerge, how it could move from the spontaneist student rebellions towards a new proletarian organization, capable of upholding a communist totality. Unlike *operaismo*, which always operates on an idea of rupture of the polity, of the Hobbesian commonwealth, Krahls Hegelian framework shows its strength when the process of emancipation is seen to occur within the full unfolding of social forms, rather than in their dissolution. This would seemingly place Krahls at odds with the line of argumentation drawn thus far, if not for the gesture of negation presupposed in such dialectical procedure, a gesture of negation impossible to fully carry out both within Negris thought and within “creative” *autonomia*.

This chapter has thus far explored how the conceptual problematic of movement shows itself to be a process of undoing rather than of self-valorization. However, If the “existential” aspect of *autonomia* soundly offers a critique of the sovereign interpretation of the use of violence and of Negris overarching “self-valorization” principle, it also risks assuming similar traits: inasmuch as subjectivation, rather than self-valorization, assumes the role of grounding element. What Krahls critique of “anti-authoritarian” reason allows us to do, perhaps against his will, is to be able to prepare a distinction between the existential and the destituent, a separation consumed in the next chapter.

In his materials for a journal article to be published as “Critique of the ideology of anti-authoritarian conscience,” Krahls observes how after the onset of the emergency

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<sup>52</sup> How the German 68 movement called itself.

laws, Germany's 1968 anti-authoritarian movement attempted to turn the "anti-authoritarian principles of solidarity between active individuals" into "the social relations of those organizing in the movement of critical protest":

In the constitutive phase of the anti-authoritarian movement (...) in a phase that was formally structured by periods of rapid escalation, the movement constituted and reconstituted itself periodically through direct action and through abstractly plebiscitary forms of enlightenment and legitimation. Today, on the contrary, comes the historical possibility of an initial organizational consolidation in which action and organization are already non-coincident. This stabilizing differentiation between organization and action is an essential presupposition to abandon the phase in which the student's movement, fearful of an identity, resorted to an activist frenzy<sup>53</sup> in order that it may be saved from disintegration, but which only allowed for a very short term tactical and technical discussion, incapable of objectively offering any possibility of a collective conscience that would develop long term social revolutionary strategies valid for the metropolis.<sup>54</sup>

Krahl's position is the same taken by *Potere Operaio*, and later by organized *Autonomia*. Political structures constitute and reconstitute themselves through direct participation in struggles, through the informal methods and practices of organization, which also impede such *ad-hoc* structures from collapsing: every thrust forward is both a conquest of territory and the postponement of an imminent dissolution, for the movement dies if it stops. Krahl sees this continuous movement forward not as a strategic and existential strength, but rather as the weakness of every movement that has failed to separate the moments of action and organization. The anti-authoritarianism of this continuous thrust forward, a movement ever afraid of its own shadow, isn't any less a normative force than the institutional forces that it tends to refuse.

Krahl further developed this critique a few months later. Anti-authoritarian "consciousness" had become able to properly grasp modern productive relations. It had

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<sup>53</sup> Adorno, in his correspondence with Marcuse about the student's revolts, accuses Krahl of having disturbed his classes just to maintain the momentum of the political movement and his leadership role in it. See Theodore Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement," in *New Left Review* 1.233 (January-February, 1999), 123.

<sup>54</sup> Hans Jurgen Krahl, "Critica della Ideologia della Coscienza Antiautoritaria" in *Costituizione e Lotta di Classe* (Milano: Jaca Books, 1972), 306.

also drafted a critique of a modern “technological democracy” that was now “separated from all the substantial content of the phase of bourgeois emancipations.”<sup>55</sup> Hence, it had identified the necessity of new revolutionary contents. The “forms of reflection through which anti-authoritarian consciousness had sought to free itself,” however, “didn’t succeed in concretely grasping that its praxis of provocative action should still create the historical conditions of the formation of class consciousness in a theoretical and scientific fashion through experimental praxis.” Krahel continues:

Its exuberant speculative self-determination posits a principle that has not yet fully unfolded as if it were historically concrete. Its inevitable ahistoricity disguised the explosive ideas of (...) revolutionary liberation struggles within the vague conceptual world of the subversive activity of marginal groups. These antinomies of anti-authoritarian consciousness couldn’t help but mirror the antinomies of bourgeois thought. (...) The petit-bourgeois manifestations of anti-authoritarian consciousness are, in this sense, a necessary product of the disintegration of the ideological illusions of bourgeois freedom of exchange and liberal tolerance, still motivated, in an individual sense, by the repressive conditions of technological and surplus value socialization.<sup>56</sup>

In its immediacy, the transcendental element of struggles is incapable of determining the conceptual categories that would turn contradictions into revolutionary antinomies. The necessary dialectal step of creating political structures was cut too short and thus bound the anti-authoritarian movement to a “petit bourgeois asociality”:

[The] objective impossibility of the student protest movement to uphold a class self-determination and the long-time frame necessary to formulate, even in a theoretical and embryonic form, the strategic conditions of an emancipatory proletarian class consciousness within the late-capitalist metropolis explain the autonomization of praxis, the sectarian and immediatist reification of the organizational form and the disappearance of a consciousness of totality. (...) [T]he petit bourgeois is only capable of understanding itself and his apparent, immediate and limited needs. He is not capable of enacting a stable, large-scale class solidarity, conquered by its own force, through organizational

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



praxis; he is not capable of perceiving society as a nexus of coercion that exists beyond the restricted ambit of the individuality of its atomized interests.<sup>57</sup>

Krahl does not accuse the movement of acting merely on “atomized self-interest.” One can find revolutionary contents in the anti-authoritarian movement, which is still an expression of class contradictions. But the movement’s widespread conception of “society” as merely a compound of atomized self-interests was an effect of the movement’s incapacity to see beyond petty-bourgeois categories, which in themselves would be incapable of perceiving the sociality of reason driving historical materialism. If the “anti-authoritarian” conscience is incapable of understanding how it is determined by the totality of the social sphere, then it is nothing more than a petty-bourgeois consciousness of the irrational contradictions of capitalism. As such, it will be doomed to self-destruction, since, according to Krahl, its false consciousness deprives it of the “dedication” and “discipline” necessary for political struggles, which is indeed a repressive socialization:

[T]he absolutization of the emancipatory egoisms is at the same time a presupposition and a result of the petit-bourgeois diaspora in the movement of anti-authoritarian protest. The will of each to satisfy their own limited needs for emancipation at the expense of others has introduced a new “natural” account of oppression in the organization of political struggles, a small war of all against all, destroying the possibility of a political communication model on the socialist needs of solidarity<sup>58</sup>

Within Krahl’s framework, exile, separation—the abandonment of society—are not self-standing proletarian categories of refusal, but risk becoming expressions of petty-bourgeois nihilism that forestall any construction of the party.

The critical framework I’ve drawn thus far, which tentatively split *autonomia* along a “political” and an “existential” line, a “organized” and a “creative” *autonomia*, a *ceto politico* and a “diffuse movement,” seemingly crumbles when it becomes evident that the same issue emerges in both tendencies: the “party of anarchy” is permanently on the verge of being subsumed either by the structure of institutionalization or by the tyranny

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 334.

of shapeless informality, an informality furthermore drawn along the lines of bourgeois conscience, where the spontaneity on which it rests is nothing if the strongest form of consciousness coming to fore.

What this means is that one cannot directly link *autonomia*'s inner tension between constituent and destituent power to concrete factions or ideological currents, nor can one separate them from each other. There isn't a "good" *autonomia* and a "bad" *autonomia*, but rather a problematic tension within every manifestation of the movement.

Krahl fully develops this problematic beyond the concreteness of the German movement in "Revolutionary Theory and Existential Radicality<sup>59</sup>" where he revisits Herbert Marcuse's attempt to mix historical materialism and Heidegger's existential analytic. Krahl describes how the concept of existence in Kierkegaard is antithetical to German idealism, as it comes to stand for the concept of the subject. With existence, Kierkegaard sought to posit subjectivity against the abstractness of Hegel's method, discovering within it an immediate experience that refused conceptual subsumption. Krahl argues that this promise of subjective freedom mystifies the dialectic of the universal and the particular in contemporary processes of alienation and reification, where the abstraction of the universal subjugates the concrete individual in a system that overrides any individual experience of freedom. Existential subjective freedom, as opposed to bourgeois positivism, is based on individual decisionism and plays into the general problematic of real subsumption, where the abstract rules over the concrete:

The antagonism of this subject has its roots in the social division of labour that corresponds to the capitalist mode of production, and in the dialectic between concrete and abstract labour that "denaturalizes" the objective constitution of products, reducing them to the commodity form. The social division of labour determines the mode of social existence, the abstract individuality of individual producers and their relation to the global subject of social production.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Hans Jürgen Krahl, "Teoria Rivoluzionaria e Radicalità Esistenziale," in *Costituzione e Lotta di Classe* (Milano: Jaca Books, 1972).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Krahl elaborates this point in his reading of Heidegger, who took up Kierkegaard's concept of existence in an ontology of meaning grounded in the experience of "being towards death." Krahl points out that Heidegger purposefully excludes all material conditions from his ontology as "mere exteriority":

[*Being and Time*] cannot allow itself to submit the quality of being to a critical analysis, but expresses, on the contrary, its immiseration, hypostatizing the *factum brutum* that somebody is, and is in general, as an essential truth of existence. It doesn't have anything to offer other than death, transfigured as the extreme possibility of life; his analytic of being, apparently deprived of content and ontologically removed from time, sums up the late bourgeois resignation of an *ars morendi* that survives by mere voluntarism. A more brutal way to express the social failure of bourgeois philosophy cannot be imagined. (...) The willingness to die, the categorical imperative of all existential thought, is the caricature of bourgeois moral philosophy and of its practical construction, of its absolute, which seeks to remove from death its character of physical coercion of deterministic necessity, morally welcoming it in the will that thereby returns to its autonomy.<sup>61</sup>

Adorno's famous reticence and opposition to certain aspects of '68 can be based on the prevalence of this existential dimension, which is present both in the desperation of armed struggle (here still in embryonic form) and in the immediacy of existential performativity. There is a self-destructive streak in both cases, which appear as if being opposed to one another. The brazen but blind willingness to face the violence of the state's repressive apparatus from a position of minority and disorganization is mirrored in the voluntarist attempts to simply abandon all reproductive social mores—"production," "society," "economy," "morals," etcetera—in the name of a shallow experimentation incapable of reproduction and consistency. Tronti's aforementioned disregard for the fate of "civilization" would perfectly illustrate this, and Negri's work on finitude also addresses this issue<sup>62</sup>.

At their core, both tendencies would seemingly rest upon an ideal of heroism and a willingness to die that, quoting Horkheimer, "can be an excellent instrument to any

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>62</sup> See chapter III

power, even the most reactionary one.”<sup>63</sup> Instances of oppression and misery are transformed into a sort of “heroic dignity” that exhausts itself in its despaired performativity. KrahI continues:

The existential radicality that Marcuse interprets in a revolutionary sense openly reveals its repressive content; the decision that is ahead of death, the activity that constitutes the autonomous subject consists in nothing else than the obtuse choice of political apathy, of letting oneself degrade into the blind instrument of the ruling class and to renounce one’s own vital interests. (...) The gesture of existential radicality that Marcuse interprets as the radical act of authentically historical existence and equates with revolutionary theory doesn’t have as its sociological interlocutor the working class that Marx identified as the political subject, nor the economic and political forms of its consciousness, but addresses, on the contrary, the petit-bourgeois radicalism of the small business owners menaced with expropriation or already declassed, and their revolutionarist *atteggiamento*, that, nevertheless, finds its expression in opportunistic political behavior.<sup>64</sup>

That *autonomia* was nothing but the dark consciousness of a petit bourgeois sector became an increasingly common trope amidst the orthodox left. *Autonomia* would seemingly rather destroy society than assume its transformation, because such transformation would be the demise of its true class origins and of the reified concept of freedom tragically presumed in them. As such, *autonomia* was often considered nothing but an anti-communist bourgeois affect and the rageful embodiment of bourgeois guilt and resentment, as Pasolini would so eagerly describe in his comments to the 1968 Valle Giulia student riots.

Even so, in Italy, this existential partiality first emerged not from the student’s movement, but from inside the factories, as Nanni Balestrini’s *Vogliamo Tutto* perfectly illustrates. Industrial workers, not students, assumed the seemingly self-destructive one-sided partisanship and antagonism. As autonomous struggles grew from the factories to the metropolis, as students and various other social categories joined in and assumed its repertoire of struggles as their own, its clear-cut working-class basis might have faded,

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<sup>63</sup> Horkheimer, Marx. “Materialismus und moral” in *Kristische theorie*, op cit, vol. 1, 82. Quoted in KrahI, 1973. 120.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 121.

but only inasmuch as the capacity to properly distinguish a pure working-class identity from a petty bourgeois one faded as well.

Even if this movement composition partially upsets Krahls position, it does not fully undermine it, for it is precisely Krahls critique of the existential that can conceptually embody the process through which “creative” or “diffuse” *autonomia* came to question itself and hence open the possibility of questioning the limits of the existential, here understood as the social and psychological exploration of the limits and pitfalls of bourgeois individuality and atomization, both in terms of subjectivity as in terms of politics.

Looking at the manifold internal literature that addressed the need for critical balances within the feminist and communal experiences of secession, we can find the much-maligned dialectic creeping back in the strategy of refusal: for it is only when partiality is capable of enacting, in Krahls words, a “self-dissolution of the viewpoint<sup>65</sup>” that it becomes truly apt at seceding. Only when the apparent nihilism and despair of refusal truly understands itself for what it is—still an attachment to command—can it become not something positive, but something other than a mere moment within the tragic unfolding of capitalist social relations.

Krahls critique of Marcuse also preemptively responds to the claims that would unfold from such “existential” considerations<sup>66</sup>: the risk that the sociological fact of the dissolution of the classical forms of the working-class grounds not an inquiry into the current forms of class composition, but rather a transfer of the orthodox forms and models of the political composition of the class into new subjects. Rather than inquire into what transformations occur in proletarian subjectivity, it is merely assumed that new subjects and new social formations receive the Olympic torch of socialist progress, even if through another name.

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<sup>65</sup> Hans Jurgen Krahls, “Teoria critica e prassi” in *Costituzione e Lotta di Classe* (Milano: Jaca Books, 1972). 318

<sup>66</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (London; Penguin 1989)

By preserving the Leninist problematic of determined class formation (seen in the previous chapter), KrahI<sup>67</sup> (and Negri) suggest that such operation of recomposition must take place not merely within a sociological class composition, but also in its subjective forms. These forms, however, must maintain a measure of antagonism if they are to remain within a political sphere. It is here that it can be argued that, in order to advance in this argument, something other than a concept of the existential is needed.

*Autonomia* did indeed embody an apocalyptic, quasi-nihilist tone that was both desperate and arrogant, but only inasmuch as the demise of the workers' movement was already evident. This was truly an apocalyptic event, not just for the movement, but for capital itself. The fearless and almost suicidal commitment to violence mirrored the asocial partisanship of the separatist existential currents in that both of these affects attempted to perform a similar gesture: one of a desperate and radical refusal that sees no redeeming value at all in any degree of participation. To see these gestures as the flaws of either the individual or the class fundamentally clouds their historical meaning, that is, how they were intimately related to a collapse of the social relations which, for better or worse, sustained a historical pact between progressive and conservative factions, between capital and labour.

## V. Gesture

A tentative summary of the ground covered thus far serves to go beyond any attempt to resolve this problematic through the categories of Hegelian Marxism, as KrahI points to, or through the modalities of Negri's constituent framework.

A problem surfaces throughout the practices that emerged around *autonomia*, one which draws its inner limit. Despite their categorical and logical differences, such practices are torn between two aspects: becoming gesture and becoming abstraction. As concrete struggles sought their autonomy, they created their own repertoires of political action. On the one hand, the invention of new practical vocabularies involved both waging struggle as the use of "means without ends," that is, of making every moment of struggle capable of creating new forms of life rather than viewing them as mere stages in

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<sup>67</sup> KrahI's various reading notes on Lenin are very close to those Negri would write in the following decade.

a teleological program. This meant turning political action into “gestures,” as Agamben would later say. These, however, risked becoming abstractions instead: organizational principles that either become fully autonomous from every other concern, subsuming the capacity to generate new forms of life, or, in an inverse but parallel fashion, becoming a bridge towards recuperation. The set of problems transversal to the area of *autonomia* – both organized and creative, both antagonist and existential, both Leninist and diffuse – are precisely the ones concerned with its incapacity to fully develop a politics of gesture.

Negri’s conceptual framework hides, rather than addresses, this problem. Isolated, each of these dimensions risks merely fostering new shapes of command, exploitation, and power. Negri understood the party to be what enables and oversees the movement’s practices of self-valorization beyond their initial spontaneous forms, which would otherwise turn towards “reformism” or “terrorism.” The party’s aim in preserving the self-valorization of the movement was, in Negri’s proposal, to determine the contents of the movement so as to preserve and develop their revolutionary potentiality. In this dialectic, contents and form of the movement should remain bound to each other so that they do not veer off into the aforementioned dangers of reformism or terrorism.

This question is present throughout Negri’s work, finding numerous iterations without ever truly coming to terms with the problem that lies at its core. In *Insurgencies* (1991) Negri synthesizes the experience of *autonomia* beyond its wild and antagonistic phenomena, aiming to conceptualize movement beyond such transient forms. It was, however, written before the resurgence of the movement form in the anti-globalization struggles of the late ‘90s, early 2000s, where *Empire*, written with Michael Hardt, would argue for a concept of the multitude within the now global dimension of the multiplicity of movements. *Insurgencies* develops a theory of constituent power, separating the concept from any dialectical relation with constituted power. Constituent power here is not a foundation to be exorcised, preserved, or transformed within juridical or sovereign forms. While acknowledging that constituent power presupposes these forms, Negri affirms the autonomy of constituent power with respect to them. On his account, in its constituent form, power is to be understood as *potenza* rather than *potere*: its crystallization happens through sovereign action rather than through any inner logical

necessity. As he writes: “the paradigm of constituent power is a force that bursts apart, breaks, interrupts, unhinges any preexisting equilibrium and any possible continuity.”<sup>68</sup>

The content of this constituent potentiality is nothing other than democracy in itself, a political form in which all limiting determinations can always be revoked and suspended. Democracy here is a type of gesture rather than an apparatus of sovereign determination, where “the act of suspending, far from being defined in negative terms, founds and inheres to the possibility of the positive.”<sup>69</sup>

In typical Negrian fashion, this open constituent power becomes the framework from which to read the Western modern political tradition, as he separates those attempts to curtail constituent power (In Kant, Hobbes, Hegel, and Rosseau) from the other currents which attempt to grant it autonomy (Machiavelli, Spinoza and Marx). As *operaismo* did with the critique of political economy, Negri here reads all political categories as categories of antagonism centred on the potentiality of constituent power. Constituent power becomes the absolute political process: constituent power as absolute democracy.

Like before, the question of the inner determinations of such power are merely dismissed. That such constituent democracy can only occur through the establishment of concrete political forms implies considerations more complex than merely suggesting a degree of immanence that makes them indistinguishable from a primeval potentiality. The *ceto politico* is simply erased, while its informality is constituted as the hidden core of an appearance of potentiality. Negri, rightly so, thoroughly identifies the political forms which do stand opposed to constituted power and its manifold sovereign forms, but his blind spot is, throughout the decades, the determinations of such antagonist forms. The forms of appearance of informal, invisible, and democratic organizations whose aim rests on the antagonist dispute of power are forcefully hinged on their concrete expressions– such relation of hypostatization is forcefully already a constituted power.

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<sup>68</sup> Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



What Negri was unable to understand is that the distinction within movement is not between the political and the existential, but between its destituent and constituent processes. The existential gesture and the political gesture are but modalities of a same process, which deal with the same problems and perform the same basic kind of action, though it carries within it the possibility of different determinations and outcomes.

In other words, inasmuch as both the specificity of organization and the specificity of subjectivation in *autonomia* come to be defined in the same terms– the interruption and suspension of capital's apparatuses of command–they also come to be understood as modalities and expressions of that same process. Organization and subjectivation are different ways of suspending and interrupting capitalist power; both seek to be destituent gestures. Their categorical separation, their limit and their collapse, happens when their forms of appearance become autonomous from this destituent sense. Only once the gestural means of violence, subjectivation, and community are reduced to instrumental means is it possible to subsume them in a concept of production (self-valorization) or in a formal party.

Movement, then, is not self-valorization, but the tension between the destituent gesture and all the attempts to preserve it. No matter how skewed or delirious, in its search for ways of embodying this gesture of refusal and its attempts at finding their common denominator, *autonomia* leaves us with the possibility of a phenomenology of refusal that goes beyond identitarian, reified, or voluntarist categories.

## Chapter V. Destitution and negative care

When there's no future  
How can there ever be sin?

Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen* (1976)

Fantasy destroys power, there will come a laughter  
that will bury you all.

Graffiti at Sapienza University, Rome (1977)

To describe *autonomia* as the continuous rehearsal of destituent power perhaps risks making a heretical gesture, that of reclaiming a broad sense of the movement from those who earnestly affirm its heritage. But such a claim goes beyond mere polemics. Rather than establish the true meaning of *autonomia*, or propose a “what was to be done,” I aim here to affirm something that was transversal to the movement: the presence of destituent gestures across all of the movement's factions. With this I would like to contribute to a sense of *autonomia* that survives the moment of its emergence while avoiding the trap of formulating a recipe for political action.

In the following presentation, I treat the political problems left open by *autonomia* in light of the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and his idea of destituent power. Rather than take destituent power as an aporetic riddle, one which crowns an elegy for the Western political tradition, I use Agamben's position to deal with a more immediate concern: the problem of political and ethical action. This will require immanently outlining the limits of Agamben's concept, which I will use to define a concept of care with reference to the practices of *autonomia*. This notion of care does not completely depart from destituent power, but instead embodies the questions inherent to it. To close this thesis, I will present such care as a qualitatively “negative” type of care, a care whose aim is not safety, but rather care understood as a gesture that dissolves command.

## I. Agamben in Mirafiori

As a mass social movement, *autonomia*'s long decline came after the 1979 April 7<sup>th</sup> judicial macro-process<sup>1</sup> against key militants of organized *Autonomia*. More than twenty thousand people were questioned by the police, hundreds were arrested, and thousands fled into exile.<sup>2</sup> Even if state repression, and the recomposition of the Italian industrial apparatus managed to push the movement to the point of its own implosion, the movement already had enough contradictions woven into its own fabric to ensure that it would unravel, as the previous chapters showed. A critical analysis of the movement that doesn't venture into vague "what ifs" or "*what was to be done?*" must grasp such contradictions as a whole and identify what traversed them all.

In one way or another, the movement's practices and theory survived for decades to come, within concrete political forms like workers' inquiries and social centers and the conceptual constructs of "autonomist Marxism"<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, one won't find an overarching critical analysis of *autonomia* in these direct legacies, which often express the dim afterlife of the movement's factional decomposition.

Likewise, critiques deriving from the various opposing Marxian positions<sup>4</sup> are more often than not based on Negri's writings, and thus reduce the movement to his figure, or to his *post-factum* historical accounts of it, thereby confusing the concrete social and

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<sup>1</sup> The April 7<sup>th</sup> judicial process was a mass action against the presumed members and sympathizers of *Autonomia Operaia*. It lasted from 1979 until 1988. A number of militants, including key pundits of organized *autonomia* were immediately arrested, while over the following years over 60,000 people were questioned and 25,000 arrested. Negri's judicial ordeals lasted until the 2000s and the process fostered the French exile of hundreds of militants.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Maria Rita Prette (ed) *Gli Organismi Legali – 7 aprile (inchiesta giudiziaria contro l'Autonomia)*, in *La mappa perduta 1*, Sensibile alle foglie, 2007. 265.

<sup>3</sup> Such as the various approaches to operaismo of the German *Wildcat* journal, the UK collective *Angry Workers of the World*, the US based collective *Midnight Notes* or the various Negri activist *milieus* throughout Europe.

<sup>4</sup> See Peter Osborne, "Autonomy: can it be true of art and politics at the same time?" *The Post-Conceptual Condition* (London: Verso, 2018). See also the articles about *autonomia* and *operaismo* in the British journal *Aufheben*.

political expressions of *autonomia* with a fraction of the theory that sought to interpret such events.

To suggest that the work of Giorgio Agamben provides hints for a thorough critique of *autonomia* is, again, almost heretical. Unlike several other contemporary Italian intellectuals—from Franco “Bifo” Berardi to Paolo Virno and Silvia Federici and plenty of others—Agamben was never openly a part of *autonomia*’s groups or currents. He didn’t write in any of the famous journals and newspapers, nor has he written specifically about the movement. Even though Negri and Agamben were close in the ‘80s and ‘90s,<sup>5</sup> they have grown distant from each other publicly—Negri describes it in his memoirs—and this is clearly evinced in their respective theoretical works.

Agamben is also frequently denounced by most post-*operaismo* pundits. The recent effort to fashion an *Italian Theory* obviously mapped who fell in and out of its confines. Putting aside the question of the motivations behind this obvious attempt at branding, if *Italian Theory* does in fact define the shared intellectual terrain based in a region’s historical and political specificity, then Agamben obviously plays a key role in the development of problems around sovereignty, the state of exception, political theology, and so on. Negri and Judith Rével, however, argue otherwise. In a short conference text, *La Differenza Italiana* (2005),<sup>6</sup> Negri claims that the specificity of 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian philosophy is precisely Tronti’s partisan thought that was then developed, amongst others, by Luisa Muraro.<sup>7</sup> Such partisan thinkers would be at odds with the “soft” Heideggerianism of Massimo Cacciari and the “weak thought” of Gianni Vattimo. Agamben is strangely left out of any open consideration, a gesture that cannot but come as intentional, given the similar themes that Agamben and Tronti tackled over the years (without ever meeting personally) and given Negri’s claim in his memoirs that his rival philosopher was lost when he fell into Heidegger’s bottomless pit instead of following

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<sup>5</sup> Negri describes their friendship in his biography’s first volume, describing their eventual fallout over philosophical differences.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Negri, *La Differenza Italiana* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Italian Philosopher close to *Femminismo della differenza*.

Spinoza's unbridled joy.<sup>8</sup> Rével takes it one step further, questioning if Agamben can even be considered an "Italian philosopher."<sup>9</sup>

But beyond Italian philosophy's politicking, scattered hints directly connect Agamben and the movement of *autonomia*. His politics, as much as they were ever rendered out in the terms of a politics, are in line with the anti-authoritarian currents of the post-war ultra-left. His own writing and proximity to figures like Guy Debord and the French Tiqqun collective unmistakably attest to this.

The movement's experiences and existential themes are also often a part of his writing. In some interviews Agamben mentions his participation in the 68 riots.<sup>10</sup> His 1978 book, *Infanzia e Storia* starts with a series of melancholic impressions from an urban insurrection. His first published text discusses Walter Benjamin's concept of pure revolutionary violence against the socio-historical backdrop of the movement's embrace of armed struggle. It was shopped around several of the movement's publications before being published in a literary magazine. Several other personal anecdotes display an informal familiarity with the movement and its most preeminent characters.

Granted, the episodic and circumstantial nature of such anecdotal evidence might just as easily provide an argument for not including Agamben within the *autonomia* experience. But this evades a crucial point: no one could remain indifferent to *autonomia* and the struggles of the '70s, especially not a young philosopher. Moreover, any distance or proximity to *autonomia* and its struggles was an elective matter, and Agamben's ambiguity betrays a clearer position than might be apparent. For it reveals a willingness to step away from its ideological and institutional expressions—its *ceto politico*—while remaining firmly grounded in their problematics.

In the foreword to Paolo Virno's first book, *Convenzione e Materialismo*, Agamben briefly shows his cards: "During the '70s, in Europe, a disenchanted but not hopeless

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<sup>8</sup> Antonio Negri, *Storia di un Comunista* (Milano: Ponte Alle Grazie, 2015), 371.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Rével, "Italian Theory and Its Differences," *Italian Critical Thought*, eds. Dario Gentili and Elettra Stimili (London: Rowan and Littlefield International, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Leland De La Durantaye, "Giorgio Agamben," *Bidoun*, July 18, 2009, <https://www.bidoun.org/articles/giorgio-agamben>.

generation came to the fore to lay claim to the political not as an autonomous and totalitarian sphere, but as an *ethical community of singularities*; history not as linear continuity, but a history whose realization has been deferred too long; not work as economically finalized towards the production of commodities, but an *inoperativity deprived of an end and yet not unproductive*.<sup>11</sup> What is remarkable here is not the reference to *autonomia per se*, but rather how much of Agamben's conceptual repertoire is directly grounded on the struggles of the '70s, as will become more evident below.

This would all be sufficient to solidify Agamben as a commentator on the legacy of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, however unwelcome. But the connection runs deeper. If we step aside from the interpretation of *autonomia* and *operaismo* as Negri-led theoretical positions, and instead treat them as complex social and political movements, then it is clear that *autonomia*'s bifurcations go beyond any claim to orthodoxy, as the previous chapters have shown. Not only was Agamben's work deeply inspired by its "existential" or "creative" currents, but his notion of destitution is crucial for understanding *autonomia*'s splits and aberrations. If one were to compare his work with *post-operaismo*, one would certainly find thematic overlaps and a common conceptual vocabulary;<sup>12</sup> however, it is within the *pro-situ* and *post-councilist* tendencies that one can draw a clear line connecting Agamben and *autonomia*.

As mentioned before, *Ludd* and *Comontismo* developed from splits within *Classe Operaia* and *Potere Operaio*. The previous situationist influences met Jacques Camatte's contributions, turning the experience of bohemia to one of militancy, thereby positioning themselves closer to the movement's reality. As we've seen, Camatte organizes his reading of Marx, and hence of a communist problematic, through the concept of the *gemeinwesen*. *Gemeinwesen* is tentatively translatable as "community," but also as "common being" if one interprets it as the social form of the open, ontological relation between humanity and nature; it is Marx's *species-being* read as a social and political form. Camatte's use of real subsumption reads it as the abandonment of the potentiality

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<sup>11</sup> Introduction to Paolo Virno, *Convenzione e Materialismo* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> See Jason E. Smith, "Form-of-life and antagonism," *Agamben and Radical Politics*, ed. Daniel McLoughlin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

of *gemeinwesen* and its reorganization as capital's own community, that is, the community of capital as a collection of alienated individuals.

Taken at face value, Camatte's take seems hopelessly essentialist and bound to a necessarily reified concept of community. But, as Cooper Francis argues in a 2020 article,<sup>13</sup> "[Camatte's] concept of *gemeinwesen* should not be understood as the pre-modern community or even a new universal community of humanity,"<sup>14</sup> but rather, as *Comontismo* puts it, "as the natural and social ground in opposition to the reified world of commodities in which all the alienated human senses have lost their capacity to sense what is to come."<sup>15</sup>

Giorgio Cesarano, part of *Ludd* and *Comontismo*, would develop this idea further. Reflecting upon *Comontismo*'s practices of criminality, Cesarano would claim that this is no "comportment or line of conduct that can be defined as revolutionary in itself."<sup>16</sup> As Francis recounts, quoting Cesarano at points,

[H]e attempted to establish a third path for the pro-revolutionary between militancy and quietism: the real movement is not to be found in the proliferation of the forms of revolt already identified in the past, but located in the potential self-transcendence of every "form of politics which arises from even minimal conflict with the 'concrete' given." (...) The revolutionary process, argued Cesarano, "can never again take the exclusive traits of civil war," but rather must find the sense of a "disaggregation actively pursued."<sup>17</sup>

As Francis puts it:

Camatte and especially Cesarano instead attempt to think the ontological problem of a non-exclusive unity to the species. (...) Humanity, for Camatte and Cesarano, is as collection without presupposition or condition of belonging, without spatial or temporal borders, that, cutting across all past and given social forms into the future, involves no possible exclusion of the modalities that human existence might take. (...) The fabled

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<sup>13</sup> Francis Cooper, "The Passion of Communism," *Endnotes Journal* 5 (2020), 261.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>15</sup> *Comontismo*, "Prelimeari sul comontismo," *Endnotes Journal* 5 (2020), 256.

<sup>16</sup> Cesarano, quoted by Endnotes, *Endnotes Journal* 5, 257.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-258.

invariance is affirmed as the *Gemeinwesen* which cannot be a “human nature” or a transhistorical anthropological invariant but rather the “corpus in which the diverse human generations can rediscover another in perceiving their difference... the common being of humans in their becoming [and] a form that this common being can take.”<sup>18</sup>

Agamben’s work directly pursues these concerns, as is evident in texts like *The Coming Community*, whose non-essentialized community of “whatever singularities” accords with the critical frameworks of Camatte and Cesarano.<sup>19</sup> None of this is to argue that Agamben’s corpus remains exclusively bound to the historical experience of *autonomia* or to the terms of its many factions. On the contrary, what I mean to suggest is simply that the debates that arose in *autonomia*’s internal rifts survive, under different formulations, in Agamben’s work.

The argument presented here, however, does not attempt to fully outline the relationship between *autonomia* and Agamben, but rather seeks to pinpoint those moments in his thought that tentatively answer the questions that remain open at this point in my inquiry. As such, in turning to Agamben, I aim to elaborate a general overview and critique of *autonomia* that goes beyond the tension between its internal factions.

## II. The messianic gesture

*The Time that Remains* (2000), Agamben’s commentary on Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, succinctly addresses most of the themes that he would later develop in the *Homo Sacer* series.<sup>20</sup> Without delving into its pertinence to the debate around Paul between the likes of Alain Badiou, Jacob Taubes, and plenty others, one can read *The time that Remains* as one of Agamben’s most explicitly political texts. As such, the fundamental political problems that it presents are deeply connected to the experiences of the Italian movements of the ‘70s. This is thoroughly evident in the way that Agamben

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<sup>18</sup> Francis, “The Passion of Communism,” 261. The quotations are from Jacques Camatte, “Vers le communauté humain,” in *Invariance* Series III No. 3 (June 1978).

<sup>19</sup> This idea, however, is also present in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s later work, in the concept of “a people to come” that surfaces in *What is Philosophy* (1991).

<sup>20</sup> Agamben’s English translator Adam Kotsko also claims this in a brief overview of the *Homo Sacer* series. See <https://itself.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/acla-agamben-paper.pdf>.



highlights *operaismo*'s anti-Hegelianism by problematizing the process of subsumption and privileging *operaismo*'s destituent element, all while questioning Negri's constitutive impetus.<sup>21</sup>

Agamben focuses on the Pauline antinomy between law and faith—a *nomos epagelia* and a *nomos pistis*, a normative law and a law of faith—which upholds faith as the ethical element that dissolves the normative structure of law. Agamben draws clear parallels between this opposition and the one between the normative aspects of Capital's domination and the affirmation of an immediate antagonism, hostile to capitalist mediation. That such antagonism can be compared to faith implies that it can be understood as a specific spiritual and material practice—a “form-of-life.” This possibility materialized through *autonomia*'s collective forms of struggle, which thoroughly embodied the antinomy read in Paul's categories.

However, Paul's *Letter to the Romans* does not present the antinomy as an open antagonism, rather, it makes the aporetic claim that one should not “make the law inoperative through faith (...) on the contrary, the law should remain strong.<sup>22</sup>” What Agamben aims at, in rescuing this apparent paradox, is to claim, as the *autonomia* tendencies described in the previous chapters did, that any direct opposition between a normative power and its antagonist will lead to the latter mirroring the former. The first claim—that law should not be made inoperative through faith—argues both against instrumentalizing the ethical substance of faith by defining it as a means to an end and against determining faith exclusively through its opposition to law. The defense of law's force—the claim that the law should remain strong—also rests on this reasoning. If the law were to be weakened by faith, it would signal that the one had mediated the other. This would further imply the alteration of faith's destituent content, or the replacement of law by faith—the law of faith becoming the new normative law. The *nomos* of faith doesn't nullify the *nomos* of norms so much as it stops its functioning, much like *autonomia*'s repertoire of struggles didn't seek to mirror sovereign repressive apparatuses, but sought instead to break up their systematic functioning.

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<sup>21</sup> Agamben's messianism is evidently and thoroughly influenced by Walter Benjamin's messianic reading of Marxism, especially on “Thesis on the Philosophy of History.”

<sup>22</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Il Tempo che Resta* (Rome: Bolatti Boringhieri, 2001), 12.

Through this Pauline antinomy, Agamben argues for a politics that doesn't unfold through forms of sovereign power, but through a particular concept of weakness: "as messianic potency realizes and acts within the form of weakness, so it has effect on the sphere of the law and its works, not simply negating them and nullifying them, but by deactivating them, making them inoperative,<sup>23</sup> no longer working. (...) The messianic isn't the destruction, but the deactivation and the unfeasibility of the law."<sup>24</sup>

This appraisal of weakness is seemingly at odds with Tronti's Nietzschean will to power, which is a fundamental trait of *operaismo* that is overtly evident in a name such as *Potere Operaio*. But even if it is impossible to argue against this apparent opposition, it is arguably more complex than it might seem. *Operaismo* measured workers' power precisely through their capacity to organize beyond legitimate structures of political representation. Within such reading, "Weakness" and "power" stop being measures of force to become instead reified social forms, mere statuses of systematic inclusion and exclusion. Hence, a potency that acts within weakness is a potency that acts beyond the normative forms of power. Agamben's idea of a weakness that reveals itself as strength through what makes it unpowerful is in fact far from his own: one could say that it is at the heart of any communist project, lest one forget that it requires having nothing to lose but one's chains.

Agamben's attempt to find an innovative category of political action through the destitution of its normative categories is akin to the Trontian-Negrian attempt to circumvent the transitional categories of PCI's Hegelian historicism, albeit in a different form. Agamben enthusiastically suggests that Paul's concept of faith as what renders the law inoperative—*katargein*<sup>25</sup>—entered modern Western philosophy through Luther's translation of the concept as *aufhebung*: the process of determinate negation, or

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<sup>23</sup> The concept of inoperativity, alongside that of "community", sees a thorough debate surfacing throughout the '80s between Maurice Blanchot and Jean Luc Nancy. Cf Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, *Il Tempo che Resta*, 93.

<sup>25</sup> *Katargein* is a compound formed from *argos*—I make inoperative, I deactivate, I suspend the efficacy.

sublation, that later provided the keystone for Hegel's dialectical system. Thus, Agamben draws a line in the Western philosophical tradition: whereas Hegelian negation is locked in a logic of identity by means of the cancellation of differences between opposing terms and the preservation of their common ground, Agamben draws on the messianic tradition to think deactivation as a type of negativity in which upholding is consistent with a possibility of exile that renders it essentially obsolete. This *aufhebung*–Paul's *katargein*–lacks any teleological necessity, as it refuses any structuring end, just as it refuses an understanding of history as the unfolding of contradictions.<sup>26</sup>

How can one oppose a messianic suspension of historical-dialectical teleology to a politics of the socio-historical development of productive forces? Some clarifications regarding Agamben's problematic of the messianic are in order here.

Agamben distinguishes the messianic from the apocalyptic to concrete a specific form of temporality. Whereas the apocalyptic prophet announces a coming end of times, the messianic apostle, on the contrary, testifies to the arrival of this end from within the time of the end itself: "the prophecy must keep silent: it is now fulfilled."<sup>27</sup> Likewise:

The apocalyptic is situated in the last day, the Day of Wrath: the end is fulfilled, and it describes what it sees. The time of the apostle is not, on the contrary, the *eschaton*, the end of times. To sum it up in a formula, the difference between messianism and apocalypse, between the apostle and the visionary, it could be said, following Gianni Carchia, that the messianic is not the end of time, but the time of the end. What concerns the apostle is not the last day, is not when time ends, but the time that contracts and begins to end. The time that remains between time and its end.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Agamben's problematization of the state of exception, that he would develop in the 2003's second volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, draws heavily on this idea of a deactivation of law. Resorting to Schmitt's concept of the state of exception, which places the exception at the core of the rule of law, Agamben draws a structure of power where such messianic inoperativity is retained at the core of sovereignty—a power that works to prevent its own messianic dissolution, precisely through an inclusion of the messianic dissolution. At the core of the sovereign's capacity to decide on the suspension of the rule of law is the possibility of making that law coincide with the immediate decision of the sovereign.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 63.

It would be tempting to read the description of messianic time as the postulation of the time of a territory autonomous from capital (from capital as a form of time). Indeed, that could be one of the possible interpretations of abolishing the temporal structure of accumulation and a communism to come. In that sense, the messianic provides a different ontology of time, one that accords with the anarchist conceptual production of the '80s and '90s—for example, Hakim Bey's *Temporary Autonomous Zones* (TAZ). But there's a severe distinction to be made here: Bey's TAZ posits a "temporary" autonomous zone, an ephemeral exteriority to time, to capital, to the state, etcetera. Rather than making time inoperative, the TAZ plays within the hiccups of time, finds spaces in between time and creates a different temporal dimension within time itself. Agamben's messianic is substantially different in that the messianic is a spectral antagonism that deactivates time, or renders it inoperative.

Rather, this messianic quality of time and politics emerged as a palpable experience out of a phenomenology of revolt, of a lived experience of the thousand small insurrections that made up the life of the area of *autonomia*. It is an experience that is only livable within the moments of suspension of metropolitan or factory command. Furio Jesi's text about the Spartacist insurrection, *Spartakus: The Symbolology of Revolt*, written in 1968 but only published in 2000, perfectly illustrates Agamben's idea of messianic time, and how it relates to *autonomia*'s existential epistemology of violence discussed in the previous chapter:

You can love a city, you can recognize its houses and its streets in your remotest or dearest memories; but only in the hour of revolt is the city really felt as your own city—your own because it belongs to the I but at the same time to the "others"; your own because it is a battlefield that you have chosen and the collectivity too has chosen; your own because it is a circumscribed space in which historical time is suspended and in which every act is valuable in and of itself, in its absolute immediate consequences. One appropriates a city by fleeing or advancing, charging and being charged, much more than by playing as a child in its streets or strolling through it with a girl. In the hour of revolt, one is no longer alone in the city<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Jesi, Furio. *Spartakus: Simbologia Della Rivolta*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000. 34.

As I've said before, the particularity of *autonomia* vis-à-vis other social struggles of the '70s is that its moments of insurrection lasted and expanded long enough to create their own poetic and conceptual forms. Italian militant philosophy from the '70s onwards focused on a shared phenomenological experience of the "suspension of time," in which every act acquired an autonomous, metaphysical meaning. The messianic is not the vain and desperate expectation of a rapturous event, but, on the contrary, a political modality of experience. To understand it as such within the scope of this thesis, however, it is necessary to rid this problem of all mystical or poetic overtones.

At this point, then, I would like to investigate Agamben's categories of the messianic in terms of spiritual and ethical practices that double as categories of political action. Another fundamental rupture is set in motion here, one that is akin to Cesarano's denial of any essential revolutionary gesture. Agamben attempts to define a modality of political action—of militancy—that is wholly distinct from that of the Marxist traditions. The position that politics is a series of constructive gestures, grounded in the bare materiality of alienated institutions and inscribed within the historical unfolding of events, erases this messianic element that, nevertheless, as Agamben will argue, is a fundamental political category. Marxism's ontology of *species-being qua* labour is also quite incompatible with Agamben's messianism; for on these accounts, historical emancipation depends on the historical becoming of a material world completely determined by the temporal objectivation of human capacities.

However, within their own teleological scope, these conceptions are partially right: if a messianic time could be integrated into a causal sequence of pre-figured actions it wouldn't be a suspension of time, but precisely its actualization. One cannot organize towards the constitution of a messianic time. Jesi's collapse of order that unveils an explosive layer of meaning and sensual pleasure is not a plannable event that revolutionaries can conjure at will.

This doesn't mean, however, that a messianic action, or an action falling within what Agamben deems messianic, can't be thought. It can, precisely as a destituent action, one that focuses on deactivating what makes time progress. In this light, time appears as the immediate form of history, history as the real abstraction articulating the processual becoming of subject and object as separated elements. The impression that

time stops comes from the suspension of the distinction between subject and object; this is implicit in Jesi's phrase "every action has a meaning." The essential political question grounding *autonomia*, and its demise, would then be how to think a force that would be capable of rendering the law of subsumption and domination inoperative, precisely through a modality of "faith," that is, of an ethical form of life capable of altering the subject/object relation.

The distinction between the problematic of messianic time and a simple, idealist utopian exile is grounded on grasping it in terms of a concrete modality of activity rather than on a moral refusal. The specificity of action is parallel to the one which makes law inoperative. Through the concept of *klésis* (meaning "vocation," both calling and profession) Agamben reads Paul to articulate a type of gesture that revokes the condition in every factual condition, making them inoperative. The movement of *klesis* is one of nullification: for instance, Paul destitutes all previous conditions that divided the world into Jews and non-Jews when claiming that "circumcision is nothing, the foreskin is nothing." The distinction between Hebrew and *goj*, between slave and master, collapses within such calling, inasmuch as they are rendered meaningless categories: "a call of the call: to this any condition can join, but such condition is radically revoked and called into question in the act of its joining."<sup>30</sup>

Negri's need to posit a conceptual reformulation of labour within *autonomia* comes from the same impetus that led Marx to his considerations in 1844. To become a political force, the refusal of the plight of the capitalist mode of production needs to reconcile itself with the need for productive and reproductive activity. Agamben, as a communist thinker, follows the philosophical problem of establishing a just and rewarding relation between existence and reproduction, as his philosophy of the *klesis* assumes the task of giving a concrete content to the refusal of labour:

*Klesis* points to the particular transformation that every juridical status and every worldly condition undergoes by the fact of being its relation to the messianic event. It is not one of eschatological indifference, but the transformation, the intimate transformation of every

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 63.

single worldly condition by the fact of being *called*. The *ekklesia*, the messianic community, is literally all messianic vocations<sup>31</sup>.

If the “messianic event” is not a historical event, but the suspension of history, in which every action coincides with itself as the distinction between subject and object collapses, then each particular condition is maintained, though profoundly changed by such calling. The messianic calling does not have a concrete content, there is not specific messianic activity, rather, the actions once performed as alienated abstract labour are now performed as the destitution of any worldly condition. Unlike Negri’s concept of self-valorization, which seeks to redeem abstract labour through the positivity of use-value, Agamben’s *klesis* seeks to shift away from a notion of emancipation based on a social ontology of production to the “deontologization” of production. The plight, toil and drudgery of the human relation with nature would still be present in the messianic destitution of labour, yet it would be devoid of its capacity to socially and metaphysically determine all human relations. The community of messianic vocations under capitalist conditions, then, would be a collective decision to use the many talents of production and reproduction against any power grounded in an abstract of value.

The political significance of Agamben’s reading of Paul appears when we see how the militant forms of *autonomia* can be understood through the Pauline vocation. Franco Piperno’s statement (quoted in Chapter III) about *autonomia* as the movement of use value very clearly outlines how *autonomia* built itself as a “group of messianic vocations” based on transformations taking place in terms of vocations: those in *autonomia* reinterpreted their capacities, interests, and desires in the movement’s material expansion of the infrastructures as an antagonistic *gemeinwesen*. Whereas more classical political stances view movements as the prelude to rational reorganizations of life, here actual, political life starts from the moment where it finds its *klesis*, its calling towards a destituent vocation.

But it is also here that Agamben’s political proposition lands in an apparent paradox that he will develop using various forms and images, perhaps the most poignant being the figure of the *musselman* in *Quel Che Resta de Auschwitz* (1998). There, the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 28.

*musselman* is the catatonic figure of the concentration camp detainee who has abandoned all reaction to sensual stimuli, but whose very abandonment can be interpreted as a tentative modality of resistance. How can a relation of force simply be abandoned? I will return to this problem later on, but in *Il Tempo che Resta*, Agamben offers a pertinent, but inconclusive, answer.

Agamben, again citing Paul, identifies the formula of messianic vocation as the *as not*—the “*hos me*” in Paul’s Greek. The messianic calling does not call one to abandon one’s worldly condition, rather, it calls one to remain in it *as not*. The Hebrew *as not* Hebrew, the *Goj as not Goj*: “Vocation calls to nothing and nowhere: for this reason, it may coincide with the factual condition each one is called from. But, precisely because of this, it revokes it top to bottom. The messianic vocation is the revocation of any vocation.”<sup>32</sup>

The parallel between an idea of communism and a laicization of Jewish and Christian messianic theory is not Agamben’s but was most famously suggested by Walter Benjamin. A problem arises here, however, which is that Agamben suggests that the messianic calling is the process of struggle itself, rather than as description of a just and emancipated society. This trope is not new—we’ve seen in previous chapters how *operaismo* and *autonomia* rest precisely on the possibility of a coincidence between forms of struggle and instances of communist emancipation. Negri can posit this prefigurative notion of emancipation because he starts from a workers’ identity (no matter how unorthodox and negative) whose affirmation can arguably coincide with its will to power. But with Agamben, things are more complicated, because his starting point is the opposite: struggle begins with the destitution of one’s identity through an antagonism that goes beyond any militant, or oppositional social form. Resistance here takes a paradoxical form: one can abandon the metropolis and tend to the land, but one cannot simply walk out of a master and slave relationship, much less a concentration camp—and yet these latter circumstances are precisely where it is necessary to conceive of resistance and where it becomes possible to do so by way of the messianic *as not*. The destitution of identity is easily graspable within the fury of actual revolts and insurrections, but appears to be much more ethereal when it comes to actually

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 29.



organizing and planning those moments: there cannot be a messianic building of the party, because parties crystalize vocations, they don't dissolve them.

One must remember, however, how parts of *autonomia* very explicitly refused to build the party, while even its organized factions refused to base the party on a fixed methodology, connecting it instead to a shifting political composition of the class. *Hōs me*—as not—can then be read as the gesture of revoking the determinations of capital's ontology. This process extends from the organization of the factory and the metropolis to the organization of the movement itself. The *hos me* does not prefigure an abstract negation, set in absolute terms, that would propose the ontological plenitude of messianic time against the oppressive determinations of capital's eternal present. On the contrary, it seeks to destitute facticity in a way that cannot be systematized or actualized as such. The suspension of time and the abolition of the distinction between subject and object present in the vortex of the insurrection, as recounted in Jesi's text, does not open a space of diaphanous emptiness, but on the contrary, a feverish facticity. One's talents, abilities, knowledge, and crafts can only truly emerge as such in the messianic *hos me*, as concrete modes of action and being unfolding against their abstraction and subsumption.

That Agamben's problematic of messianic revocation is connected to a problematic of *autonomia* (as movement) becomes clear once we read the enigmatic conclusion of Agamben's text on movement (first introduced in Chapter III). Agamben ends by affirming that his position concerning movement has always been to act as if it doesn't exist when it exists, and to act as if it exists when it doesn't. The affirmation only gains sense when read through the messianic *Hōs me*: movement *hos me* movement, movement as *not* movement. The specific form-of-life of militancy—the vocation of movement—should destitute both the institutions that govern life and the institutions that govern the movement (which aims to overthrow those same institutions). This isn't intended to advance a nihilistic position that would bind every collective effort to a transcendent position forever out of reach, on the contrary, it is to affirm the practical gestures of the movement against their abstraction as ideology and institutionalization.

But yet again, the vocation of the *Hōs me* risks becoming a mere rhetorical effect if it has no basis in actual activity. Its ontological status cannot be defined by the

Aristotelian metaphysics of potentiality and act, just as it refuses any clear division between subject and object.

Following Paul again, Agamben refers the messianic vocation to the activity of *chresis*, or use. He returns to this theme in greater detail in the last volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, *L'Uso dei Corpi* (*The Use of Bodies*).<sup>33</sup> Agamben takes the Greek verb *chresthai* – “to use” – as the linguistic expression of the mode of action of the destituent gesture. The particular linguistic status of *chresthai* is complex, since the word is never used on its own, but always in a reflexive way such that the use of something implies a process of subjectivation. Use refers the subject to themselves, such that their use also performs something on the subject itself. Michel Foucault also addressed the concept, before Agamben, claiming that, with *chresthai*, “the result is a transformation in the subject’s ontology. Not a subject using an object, but a subject that constitutes itself solely through use. (...) [U]se, in this sense, is the affect a body receives inasmuch as it is in contact with another body.”<sup>34</sup> In *L'Uso dei Corpi*, Agamben states that *chresthai* “is the form Paul gives of the messianic life in the form of the *come non*. To live messianically means to ‘use’ *klesis*, the vocation, and the messianic *klesis*, is, consequently, something that can only be used and not possessed.”<sup>35</sup>

Agamben thinks a use that goes beyond subsumption through the monastic forms-of-life in *L'Altissima Povertà* (*The Highest Poverty*)<sup>36</sup> There, he discusses the Franciscan order’s early history in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which saw it immersed in a conflict with the Vatican over the concepts of use, property and law. The Franciscans claimed a right to “use” goods without claiming property over them, since they believed that nature’s becoming exempted reproduction from the necessity of property. However different conceptually, Agamben’s reading here is close to Marx’s 1844 concept of labour as a metabolic relation with nature, where nature itself is a source of wealth, and the human form of it dispenses with the necessity of any social form of property: the very nature of use is opposed to property and its abstract forms. For the Franciscans, their opposition

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<sup>33</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *L'Uso dei Corpi* (Rome: Neri Pozza, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du Sujet. Cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)* (Paris: Seuil, 2001).

<sup>35</sup> Agamben, *L'Uso dei Corpi*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *L'Altissima Povertà* (Rome: Neri Pozza, 2011).

to property was what made it possible for them to live a life beyond the command of law. The Vatican thoroughly refused this, however, because it obviously challenged its own conception of property and the legitimacy of its power. Agamben claims that the Franciscans lost their political independence when they agreed to enter into a theological and juridical discussion with the Vatican, hence submitting to its manner of legal procedure.

Against the need to juridically legitimate a different concept of use, Agamben defends it in terms of the modes of subjectivation used by the Franciscan monks—through their “techniques of self,” in Foucault’s terms. Franciscan monastic life was the continuous enactment of different methods of subjectivation, where monks inscribed their devotion to God in their own bodies and minds so as to cultivate their own particular perception of the sacred. In that sense, the practice of use first and foremost concerns the use of one’s own transcendental categories.

### III. Destituent power

The logical conclusion of Agamben’s political thought regarding use is the notion of a destituent power (*potenza destituente*). It is worth pointing out that *potenza* in Italian signifies power as potentiality (*potenza*), rather than as force or command (*potere* in Italian). The concept was first used by Tronti, in different terms, in a 2005 interview with a French-Italian journal about the French *banlieue* revolts of the same year.<sup>37</sup>

A destituent power concerns itself with the “[deactivation] of the apparatus of the exception of bare life,”<sup>38</sup> or the deactivation of sovereignty. The *Homo Sacer* series centres around the concept of bare life, which refers to a life that has been reduced to its mere survival by being stripped of all qualities that make up its form, especially those that make up its political status (“citizen,” “human,” etcetera). This bare life is managed by governmental and sovereign apparatuses, which locate it precariously between biopolitical valorization and expendability. That is, the fact that the bodily life of human populations are the object of protection and enhancement doesn’t prevent them from

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<sup>37</sup> Mario Tronti, “Sul Potere Destituente” *Potere Destituente. Rivolte Metropolitane* (Rome: Mimesis, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Agamben, *L’Uso dei Corpi*, 334.

the permanent risk of being deemed not only non-essential or expendable, but also undesirable and killable. While there are plenty of Marxian accounts of exclusion and sovereign violence that are based on an ontology of human productivity, Agamben's point seems to be that modern apparatuses of inclusion into political and social belonging—primarily citizenship and social welfare measures—necessarily also operate as apparatuses of exclusion. That is, their primary operation is to organize qualified forms of life through political inclusion, but always on the basis of the codification of certain groups excluded from the law (the refugee, the criminal, the surplus worker, the infected). This codification is the first step towards the creation of a zone of indifference in between them that knows no limit.

This inclusive-exclusion is, as we've seen, grounded in the split between "life and its form." The expression is intentionally enigmatic, for it is not conceptually evident that essence and form should coincide with life, or that a concept of life is valid as an abstract principle—especially in a legal concept of sacred life. However, this is precisely Agamben's argument: sacred life means, on the one side, the reduction of life to bare survival without any qualities, and, on the other, the predicates and qualities that make up its constantly shifting identity under the regime of biopolitical capital—including its identity as an object of knowledge. It is only inasmuch as one can define an essential nature of life that one can deem it such and such, that one can come to build a politics based on the exclusion, exploitation, and disposal of non-essential natures.

If the sovereign exception is not only at the heart of all social relations, but forms the very basis of "Western metaphysics," as Agamben claims, then "a different dimension of politics and life won't be thinkable if we aren't first capable of deactivating the apparatus of the exception of bare life."<sup>39</sup> Such a task requires dismantling the separation between life and its form that constitutes the founding principle of the sovereign apparatus, or its *archè*. The Greek word *archè* means both power (hence the term anarchist) and origin, or principle. Every *archè*, every fundamental origin is also an order that grounds. That is, every foundational principle involves an act by which "something is divided, excluded, pushed to the bottom and, through this exclusion, is

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

included as *archè* and grounding.”<sup>40</sup> As Agamben goes on to illustrate, this logic does not just apply to the inclusive-exclusion at the heart of the political, but the ontology of the human as such:

The *archè* is constituted by splitting factual experience and pushing down to the origin – that is, excluding – half of it, to then rearticulate it with the other half, including it as foundation. The city is grounded on the splitting of life into bare life and politically qualified life, the human is defined by the exclusion-inclusion of the animal...<sup>41</sup>

Beginnings, principles, new fundamental grounds – for Agamben, these are not historical events, but rather reenactments of the same metaphysical process of re-articulating an essential nature and its modalities. This is a wildly polemical claim to make in the context of political thought, since it implies attributing the logic of sovereignty to almost the entire breadth of emancipatory thought, despite the fact that after Marx, such thought seeks the abolition of exploitation and suffering by contributing to practices of emancipation. However, according to Agamben, this history doesn’t have the transformative power that it claims, but is merely the successive instantiation of a logical form spinning around itself in a general metaphysical hold. The difficulty in grasping a clear meaning behind Agamben’s politics rests on the fact that he does not attempt to base them on any direct relation to the development of historical forces.

This puts him at odds with even the most unorthodox of Marxian thinkers and fundamentally distinguishes his thought from most of *operaismo*’s legacy. Even if, as we’ve seen, *autonomia* does perform a similar movement, one that abandons a field of historical considerations to enter one of territorial and sensual politicization, it never fully abandons a constitutive gesture that aims to reconstruct an emancipatory relation between a new *archè* and new proletarian institutions. That *autonomia* decomposes around the question of the party and the organization of violence firmly problematizes it as a tension between a constituent power and a destituent one.

It is precisely against Negri’s theory of constituent power, one that he develops out of the problematic of self-valorization, that Agamben argues for a destituent power:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 336.

In modernity, radical political transformations are thought through the concept of a constituent power. (...) [I]f our hypothesis on the structure of the *archè* is correct, the fundamental ontological problem today is not work, but inoperativity, and the access to a different figure of politics cannot take the form of a constituent power, but what we may provisionally call “destituent potential” [*potenza destituente*]. If constituent power corresponds to revolutions, riots and new constitutions, a violence that sets and constitutes a new law, then a new strategy is needed for a destituent potential, whose definition is the task of all coming politics. A power that has only been abolished with a constituent violence will resurge in a different way, within the unending, unleavable, desolate dialectic between constituent and constituted power, between the violence that sets law and the violence that conserves it. (...) Constituent power is inseparable from constituted power. Constituent power is what constituted power must presuppose as foundational in order to legitimate itself. Constituent power is the figure of power in which a destituent power is captured and neutralized, such that it may not turn against power or to the juridical order as such, but only against one of its determinate historical figures.<sup>42</sup>

To think of a destituent power, a potentiality that destitutes the apparatuses of sovereign command without positing a new power, a new ontology or a new institution, means that such act must fall to the messianic use of factual conditions previously described, in which an act sabotages the functioning of law and revokes the factual conditions attached to it, meaning, it abolishes any organization of a split between bare and political life: “where an apparatus is deactivated, potency becomes a form-of-life and a form-of-life is constitutively destituent.”<sup>43</sup>

All living beings are in a form of life, but not all are a form-of-life. In the point the form-of-life constitutes itself, it destitutes and render inoperative all forms-of-life. It is only in living a life that one might constitute oneself as a form-of-life. The constitution of a form-of-life coincides, wholly, with the destitution of the social and biological conditions into which it was thrown. The form-of-life is, in this sense, the revocation of all factual vocations, which deposes them and calls into tension in the same gesture.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 351.

The philosophical problem of destituent power is akin to *autonomia*'s own political problem: how to live and act a power that doesn't ontologically presuppose or create new powers, new abstractions, new self-reproducing forms or essences?

Agamben frames the question in metaphysical terms and the answer he proposes is formulated in that very same philosophical terminology, quickly reaching its limit: to determine a destituent action in conceptual, programmatic or prescriptive terms is inherently to imbue it with a constituent meaning that inevitably turns it into a principle or a blueprint for constituting concrete actions. Therefore, Agamben's clever concept risks being reduced to its mere cleverness: stuck between being a smart conceptual riddle and an impossible program, it risks painting resignation as contemplation.

At hand, however, is a different sort of operation. Agamben's considerations on language are frequently overlooked in place of his other, more strikingly polemical discussions. Language, for Agamben, is the process of subjectivation in which sovereign apparatuses of command inscribe human beings within a concrete ontology.<sup>45</sup> The hermeneutic methodology of a lot of his work stems from this principle, and it is within it that we find the Heideggerian appreciation of poetry as the practice which stretches, and eventually destitutes, the limits of language as command and subjectivation. Agamben develops this notion to its aporetic limits, of poetic impasse and contradiction, in order to sever the sovereign relationship that mediates the potentiality of action by delimiting the capacity of language to describe it. This method is reminiscent of the way Negri describes the method of tendency, described in Chapter II, where one apprehends a structure through its most intense moments of contradiction, although here, the limits of language work on the aporias of action.

Agamben's effort consists in playing out the poetic appeal of the concept of destituent power against the limits of language in order to define it. Poetry itself appears as the messianic moment of language, as a use of language that revokes all norms and conditions. Its metaphysical appeal is precisely its status for Agamben as an insurrectional *koan*,<sup>46</sup> that is, as a cautionary tale to keep close to the heart when

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<sup>45</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Il Linguaggio e la Morte* (1982) (Rome: Einaudi, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Buddhist riddle, set in contradictory terms in order to cause perplexity and foster metaphysical inquiry.

conspiring against the state. Such an aporetic tone cleverly mirrors the messianic *come non*: theory as non-theory equals poetry; poetry as non-poetry equals theory. But, to evoke yet another *koan*, the mind risks getting lost looking at the finger and not the moon.

The merit of such a method is, of course, debatable. For as much as Agamben excavates a precise problem of political thought, such a poetic game risks engulfing the questions he advances within a simple argumentative play. Inasmuch as Agamben indeed systematizes a consistent political problem in post-war social movements and emancipatory politics, giving it a conceptual framework from which to develop and grow, and inasmuch as the aporetic ends to which he is led do in fact intrigue further research, properly following him requires that one take a step backwards. This doesn't mean that the argumentative road towards the problem of destituent power, or the concept itself, does not carry its conceptual weight, nor does it mean a refusal of Agamben's use of language. It means that to further develop the concept from the problem with which Agamben begins, one must read (as we've done thus far) the concept backwards.

If my argument thus far has served— counter-intuitively and perhaps heretically—to ground a theory of destituent power in *operaismo* and *autonomia*, such grounding also serves—heretically, I hope—to reveal a different outcome: to not remain blinded by the *aporia* of destituent power as such, but instead to develop it towards something else.

To do so requires departing from Agamben's paradoxical definition of destituent practice. When historically grounded in *autonomia*, such practices materialize (within their evident limits) in concrete actions. It is precisely from such materializations that we might move elsewhere. If *autonomia*, by dissolving over the question of power, show us its hesitation in assuming an ontology of constitutive and sovereign action, it also shows us how it sought to define a type of revolutionary action that was neither the action of sovereignty nor of the economy, neither the voluntarism of activism nor the compromise of representation. It is beyond those such spheres that one may find a concept of political action that can allow us to abandon the enigma of destitution.



#### IV. Use and care

In a 2004 interview, Agamben claims that “the idea that one should make his life a work of art is attributed mostly today to Foucault and to his idea of the care of the self. Pierre Hadot, the great historian of ancient philosophy, reproached Foucault, saying that the care of the self of the ancient philosophers did not mean the construction of life as a work of art, but on the contrary a sort of dispossession of the self. What Hadot could not understand is that for Foucault, the two things coincide.”<sup>47</sup>

To assert militancy as equivalent to making one’s life a work of art, and vice-versa, seemingly short-circuits the austerity and dandyism surrounding both postures. Revolutionary commitment and discipline, the communist ethics where personal dispositions are sacrificed towards a common goal, clash head on with the free-spirited and vain cultivation of personal affects and forms of expression associated with a creative vocation. The trope is, however, common throughout the artistic vanguards of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the point of becoming almost a triviality: from the association of Marinetti and the Futurists to both fascist and communist radical currents, through Dada’s anarchist companies, to the Surrealists’ proximity to the PCF. The idea that a liberated, emancipated, communist life would be one where the fiery intensity of political struggle would be one and the same with the inquiry into the depths of the psyche, fused with the freed technical and creative energies of a coming world freed of exploitation, was widespread amongst revolutionary movements. The culmination here is obviously the Situationist International (and similar groups, such as New York’s *Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers*), where the artistic vanguard and the revolutionary group finally seem to merge.

Foucault’s “care of self” as an art of life, however, significantly diverges from this tendency. At hand is not an “art” that is like an explosion of desires breaking the shackles of the mind and the (worker’s) flesh, but, on the contrary, an undoing of the many ways of governing the body and the psyche. The disciplinary methods and norms of such governance are turned against themselves, and austerity and discipline are

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<sup>47</sup> In Ulrich Raulff, “Interview with Giorgio Agamben—Life, a Work of Art Without an Author: The State of Exception, the Administration of disorder and Private Life,” *German Law Journal* 5 (2004).

articulated in order to outdo the shackles of command. Subjectivation becomes an artisan undoing, a use of oneself unconcerned with any goal except its own becoming, a becoming which is neither the subject of government nor the object of the autonomy of art.

The political problematic of the concept of the care of self—the practice of making one’s life a work of art—hinges the still ongoing discussions about Foucault’s later political leanings. The question is whereas his later work, from the late 70s until his death in 1984, represented a turn away from an openly leftist problematic of institutions of control towards a counterrevolutionary embrace of neo-liberalism, or, on the contrary, if the problematic of subjectivation could indeed provide new political movements with a theoretical and conceptual program beyond that of the seizing of the state.

Foucault’s focus on subjectivation is read through his dismissal of “socialism”<sup>48</sup>, here taken as mass action worked through the institutional repertoire of the workers’ movement (unions, parties, etc) and as the reformist or revolutionary capture of state apparatuses. In this narrative, Foucault’s almost libertarian suspicion of the totalitarian tendencies he read into the hegemonic forms of Marxism would have pushed him towards the embrace of a neo-liberal project whose advocacy of state retreat from the public sphere would leave spaces open for subjects to be, in Foucault’s words, “not quite so governed<sup>49</sup>”. This would not only place Foucault firmly within the burgeoning neo-liberal left (a political *milieu* that would gain consistency throughout western democracies in the 90s) as it would also make Foucault a declared enemy of any form of mass action, as care of self would clearly be an action to be performed exclusively on the individual sphere of the atomized subject. Alternatively, Foucault has also been read as providing the conceptual toolbox for the post-68 revisions of anarchism that flirted with an idea of secession or with what Murray Bookchin would very arguably call “lifestyle

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<sup>48</sup> See “Daniel Zamora: La resistance chez Foucault ne prend plus vraiment le visage de la lute de classes” in *Le Comptoir*, ([comptoir.org/2019/09/05/daniel-zamora-la-resistance-chez-foucault-ne-prend-plus-vraiment-le-visage-de-la-lutte-des-classes/](http://comptoir.org/2019/09/05/daniel-zamora-la-resistance-chez-foucault-ne-prend-plus-vraiment-le-visage-de-la-lutte-des-classes/) - accessed 15/03/2021); and *Le dernier homme et le fin de la revolution*. Zamora, Daniel & Dean, Mitchell. Lux (Paris: 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in “Qu’est ce la critique”, such formulation is clearly expressed as a step away from any radical refusal. See *Qu’est ce la critique*, Vrin (Paris: 2015), 37.

anarchism<sup>50</sup>: a series of vain and individual gestures whose individualization would consign into neoliberal recuperation and/or desperate but futile and juvenile attempts to “leave” the world behind, as in the aforementioned “Temporary Autonomous Zones”.

Against these accusations, another opinion surfaces, in which Foucault’s later research into forms of subjectivation are indeed inquiries into forms of “not being governed”, radicalizing Foucault’s original formulation. Thomas Lemke’s critical study of the later volumes of the *History of Sexuality*<sup>51</sup> was based on the then-unavailable early ‘80s lectures from the *Collège de France* and ultimately defended care of self as a political gesture. As Lemke argues, Foucault’s novel understanding of ethics was neither “an inversion of the universalist, enlightenment society,”<sup>52</sup> that simply arrives to a new normativity, nor could they simply entail “a turn from public politics to the private, an individualist ethics that fits well with universalism and liberalism.”<sup>53</sup> Even if Lemke’s reading is less suspicious of Foucault’s intentions, it risks forcing a very particular political inclination upon Foucault’s research which he himself, rightly or wrongly, dismisses.

Rather than confront these positions and attempt to unearth a Foucauldian orthodoxy of the concept of care of self, a proper sense can be derived from how it plays out against the argument built thus far. That a significant fraction of the participants in the post-68 struggles chose to abandon Marxist orthodoxy to embrace an open and collective experimentation with modes of subjectivation was not due to the alleged capitulation of the thinkers who thought and interpreted such dynamics, but rather processes which should be thought within a material and historical context.

Foucault’s alleged denunciation of Marxism<sup>54</sup> is not at all equivalent with a denunciation of Marx’s thought. Zamora builds an anti-Marxist accusation against

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<sup>50</sup> See Murray Bookchin. *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*. (Oakland. AK Press: 1995)

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Lemke, *Foucault’s Analysis of Modern Governmentality: A Critique of Political Reason*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Zamora claims Foucault assumes being “a war machine against Marxism” in a unpublished interview with four LCR (Trotskyist French organization) militants [see “Finding a ‘Left Governmentality’” in Sawyer

Foucault as if the “socialist” project hadn’t been challenged from an explicit Marxian field numerous times throughout the 20th century (from the Dutch-German left to, as thoroughly explained here, *operaismo*). Perhaps more gravely, it is suggested that the socialist project had, after 68, a thorough and over-reaching consistency. Not only did the explosion of socialist tendencies after 1956 and 1968 leave little room for any consideration of some common ground for a “union of the left<sup>55</sup>” (if ever such a thing existed unequivocally in the first place), but it also seems unrealistic that the demise of something like a unified “Marxism” was to blame on the betrayal of the French 68 intellectuals, regardless of their critical shortcomings.

It is only by ignoring the historical experience of *autonomia* that an absolute contrast of an “art of life” with the collective revolutionary processes of the ‘70s can be sustained. While elsewhere this focus on the “personal” could indeed be painted as a retreat from the collective processes of class struggle, in Italy the opposite process took place. The turn towards the singular took place in the context of an insurrectional ethics that, viewed from within struggles, appeared to posit a sensual immediacy and care that transcended social atomization. Care of self dissolved the atomization of abstract labour rather than constitute it.

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and Steinmez-Jenkins (eds). *Foucault, Neoliberalism and beyond*. (New York. Rowman and Littlefield: 2019)]. However, the interview itself has Foucault affirming nothing of the sort. Rather, when told by the interviewers that they do not want to repeat the accusations made by a former LCR member (of Foucault being “a war machine against Marxism”) Foucault claims that they could perfectly do so, in the sense that the context of the interview allowed for such confrontational stances to be made, and not in the sense of the accusation being right. Even if a true sense of the answer is open to interpretation, to quote Foucault as claiming to be a “war machine against Marxism” is simply abusive. See “Entretien inédit entre Michel Foucault et quatre militants de la LCR de la rubrique culturelle du journal quotidien Rouge (Juillet 1977) in <https://questionmarx.typepad.fr/files/entretien-avec-michel-foucault-1.pdf>. Acc. 15/03/2021.

<sup>55</sup> Zamora claims that Foucault’s anti-Marxism is further confirmed by his opposition to the *Programme Commun*, a 1972 coalition between the French communist and socialist parties with a strong Keynesian program of state intervention. Not only is the accusation bizarre (as it erases all distinction between Marx and Keynes), but it is also historically dubious. Such a coalition marked the beginning of the end of the PCF’s legendary power, and one would expect that reactions against it to be manifold, and not only Foucault’s.

That said, Foucault is also very keen to demonstrate that he does not want to sustain such subjectivation in as radical terms as plenty others would do, as we've seen in the previous chapter. This leads to a fundamentally ambiguous position. On the one hand, the care of the self and the associated problematics of subjectivation, in and of themselves, constitute "technologies of the self", which permit a population "a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves."<sup>56</sup> Foucault's discovery of a reflexive subjective agency as a part of the functioning of governmental apparatuses is not unlike the defense of workers' autonomy from capital happening *per se*, independent of the level of antagonism of such autonomy. This would become a point that Negri increasingly explored in his post-'70s works, which already harbored within itself the defense of a "good" biopolitics, opposed to "bad" biopower.

On the other hand, Foucault also mentions the possibility that the framework of governance changes from being an enmeshment of power to one of domination<sup>57</sup>. In that context, subjectivation would no longer be the currency of multiple power relations, but rather a tendentially Bartlebyesque refusal, an increasingly insurrectional "I would rather not".

In a 1977 interview with Bernard Henry-Lévy (and the irony of juxtaposing "1977"—the year where *autonomia* explodes in all of Italy—and Bernard Henry-Lévy is not lost here), Foucault claims: "We live perhaps at the end of politics. Because, if it is true that politics is a field which has been opened by the existence of the revolution, and if the question of the revolution cannot arise in these terms anymore, then politics risk disappearing."<sup>58</sup>

Foucault's statement sums up the profound ambivalence drawn thus far. If revolution is impossible and politics disappear then what remains, as is thoroughly argued in this thesis, are nothing but forms of subsumption and forms of antagonism,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>57</sup> I discuss the meaning of this term in greater detail below

<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, *Non au sexe roi, entretien avec Bernard-Henri Lévy, Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, (Paris: Gallimard. 2011) p. 266

absent all possible mediation. This formulation, however, runs positing a false equivalence between subsumption and antagonism. It is as such necessary to delve deeper into the concept of the care of self.

Whereas the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality* associate the subsumption of care of self with the development of governmental apparatuses and forms of domination, the 1981-1982 seminar dedicated to the same concept explores a different angle, in which such care of self becomes an overarching category of its own. His seminar *The Hermeneutics of The Subject* begins by opposing the Greek concept of “care of oneself” – *epimeleia heautou* – to the famous inscription upon Apollo’s temple at Delphi, home to the famous Oracle. The inscription commands those who entered to “know oneself” – *gnothi seauton*. Foucault argues that imperative of self-consciousness, which would apparently ground and command all Cartesian philosophy of consciousness, was in fact only one amongst several other practices of care<sup>59</sup>:

If the notion of care of the self refers to the set of conditions of spirituality, the Cartesian moment is the event that disqualifies the care of the self and requalifies the *gnothi seauton*, dissociating a *philosophy* of knowledge from a *spirituality* of the transformation of the subject’s very being by his work on himself.<sup>60</sup>

*Epimeleia heautou* – the spiritual practice of “care of oneself, of attending to oneself, of being concerned with oneself<sup>61</sup>” – would then denote an invisible, but transversal, practice, central to the development of Western thought.

Foucault describes care of self as “a certain way to consider things, of behaving, of undertaking actions, of having relations with other people,” a “form of attention, of looking, to look ‘inside’,” and “actions on the self by the self; change; purification; transformation and transfiguration; exercises more than actions – techniques of meditation, of memorization, of examination of consciousness.”<sup>62</sup> How does this care of

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<sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du Sujet. Cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 14.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 10.

self, seemingly an individual, normative, and austere concern, relate itself, in whatever way, to the wild, orgiastic, and perhaps desperate antics of Italy's long '68? Foucault's description of such exercises of care sets them against most of the repertoires of struggle we've seen thus far.

Militancy, even the anarchistic militancy of *autonomia*, certainly entails a series of performative and spiritual exercises: the practices of study, of critique, of discussion, of self-critique, etcetera. Assemblies can also become a space more concerned with a certain collective spiritual performance than a tool for decisions, as we've seen both in PAZ's portrayal of an *autonomia*<sup>63</sup> assembly and in the feminist critique of the male posturing within collective discussions. One can even propose to interpret the hedonistic streak of certain parts of the movement as part of spiritual exercise of excess. But these still aren't adequate to explain the parallel that I proposed. Such a relation only becomes clear once we see how the *epimeleia heautou* emerges as a form of subjectivation grounded in a use of self.

Foucault himself makes this parallel in *The Courage of Truth* (2012). Drawing a parallel between cynic practice and Christian asceticism (present, for example, in the "destitute" form of life of the Franciscan monks Agamben would later study in *L'Altissima Povertà*), Foucault claims that such intersection "would no longer be found in religious practices and institutions, but in political practices<sup>64</sup>", especially in revolutionary movements, which were not only political projects, but also "forms of life<sup>65</sup>".

The ensuing description reads like some of the descriptions of *operaismo* and *autonomia* present in the first chapter of this thesis, touching quite some of the themes I underlined before:

"[first we find] the revolutionary life in the form of sociality and the secret, the revolutionary life in the secret society (...) [in the] formation of an invisible sociality ordered according to millenarian principle and aim. (...) Second, on the other extreme there is the militantism that no longer takes the form of secret sociality but of visible, recognized,

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<sup>63</sup> See Chapter III.

<sup>64</sup> Foucault, *The Courage of Truth* (2012), 183.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 183

established organization. (...) and then, the third important way of being a militant is militancy as bearing witness by one's life in the form of a style of existence. (...) ensuring one's life bears witness breaks, and has to break with the conventions, habits, and values of society. And it must manifest directly, in its visible form, its constant practice, and its immediate existence, the concrete possibility, and the evident value of an *other* life, which is the true life. (...) the resurgence of leftism as a permanent tendency within European revolutionary thought and projects has always taken place not by basing itself on the organizational dimension, but on the dimension of militantism comprising a secret sociality or style of life, and sometimes the paradox of a secret sociality which manifests itself and makes itself visible in scandalous forms of life<sup>66</sup>.

Even if these “forms of life” are, in a sense, apparently de-historicized, inasmuch as they surface grounded in a type of *longue durée* of western subjectivity, the argument is made that subjectivation is in no way necessarily opposed to a political/revolutionary perspective. On the one hand, revolution and politics are now impossible; on the other, subjectivation through care of self, asceticism, or cynicism can be understood as revolutionary and political. The question then is how to problematize the apparent contradiction between these Foucauldian claims.

If, as we've seen in Chapter III, real subsumption is a process that makes all subjectivation stillborn, that freezes such processes within an abstract productive sphere; this calls for a type of political action that aims to dismantle the apparatuses that govern and enclose subjects within a sphere of production. Moreover, it requires that this action takes on the character of subjectivation. Antagonism, refusal, exile, and so on, are all extreme, fringe expressions of this care of self. Foucault himself agrees, when considering the contemporary reaction to such practices:

All these injunctions to exalt oneself, to devote oneself to oneself, sound to our ears like what? A sort of challenge and defiance, a desire for radical ethical change, a sort of moral dandyism, the assertion-challenge of a fixed aesthetic and individual stage? Or else, they sound to us like a somewhat melancholy and sad expression of the withdrawal of the individual who is unable to hold on to and keep firmly before his eyes, in his grasp and for

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 185



himself, a collective morality (that of the city-state, for example), and who, faced with the disintegration of this collective morality, has naught else to do but to attend to himself.<sup>67</sup>

By way of thinking the care of the self in relation to *autonomia*, here we have, on the one hand, the care of the self as an expression of antagonism, on the other hand, it appears to be a compensatory form of exile from a dead-end historical process. Here, the parallels start to emerge, for in *operaismo* and *autonomia* this apparent split in the meaning of the care of the self took on collective, rather than individual, dimensions. Foucault himself would add some complications to this split by asserting that not only is care of self is always a social phenomenon, but is always already involves separating oneself from a social or moral totality: “you cannot take care of the self in the realm and form of the universal.”<sup>68</sup> But the care of the self, as Foucault studied it, was not just an aristocratic practice; it was linked to fraternities, brotherhoods, schools, sects, and social networks of friendship.

Foucault anticipates this political aspect of subjectivation in his own work by some years. In the 1972 *Collège de France* lectures, just as his own research was beginning to theorize power, he discussed the concept of civil war in terms of the historical, antagonistic opposition of self-oriented practices to the government of the city (as opposed to the resurgence of the *war of all against all*).<sup>69</sup>

Far from being that moment of atomic disintegration requiring the intervention of a constitutive and pacifying mediation (the sovereign as founding principle of the social body), civil war is the very process through which new communities and their institutions are established. It is not limited to being the expression of a temporally limited, constitutive power since it is always at work. Division, conflict, civil war, and *stasis* structure and de-structure power; they form “a matrix within which elements of power come to function, are reactivated, break up<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du Sujet*. Cours au Collège de France (1981-1982), 12-13.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>69</sup> See the first and second lessons of Foucault's course in Foucault, *La Société Punitif* (2013).

<sup>70</sup> Foucault, Michel. *La Société Punitif*. (2013). 32.

At this point we are deep inside the problems that animated *operaismo*. Foucault's understanding of civil war as a political field of opposing subjectivations, as a Schmittian political enmity transformed into a struggle between forms of life and their subsumption, strongly resembles *operaismo*'s understanding of class antagonism. Domination, as real subsumption, isn't merely an exercise of power, of hierarchical command, of violent might, but precisely command and control over subjectivation and over the "free play of subjectivities."<sup>71</sup> Whereas power is always an unceasing shuffling of forces, domination is the crystallization of their functions in unchangeable terms.<sup>72</sup>

This distinction between power and domination is briefly mentioned in a short interview.<sup>73</sup> If the field of power is indeed one where its categories and dynamics are permanently plastic and in a state of continuous reversal—indeed, a state of play, where no agent truly has the capacity, or desire, to permanently overcome the other—then it is necessary to account for how power becomes fixed, how numerous apparatuses crystallize and reproduce relations of power. Whereas domination and freedom are mutually exclusive, power and freedom are not; in fact, they imply and are conditions of possibility of one another.

If power and domination are indeed opposing dimensions, then they can be understood as antagonistic modes of force, in which power represents the continuous free play of forces, including both the formation and dissolution of apparatuses, and where domination represents the opposing process of subsuming all subjectivations. What this difference proposes is that the constitution of plural, even contradictory, forms-of-life is inherently contrary to domination. The scattered, contradictory, dispersed form of *autonomia* was in itself an embodiment of this opposition.

This, of course, returns us to two points, which come up in any account of *autonomia*: on the one hand, the "free play" of different subjectivities can become autonomous from antagonism and result in a counter-cultural field; on the other hand, antagonism can become autonomous of the "free play," up to the point of establishing a

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>72</sup> Which, perhaps not surprisingly, is one of the French translations of subsumption.

<sup>73</sup> Michel Foucault. "The Ethics of the Concern of Self as Practice of Freedom," *Essential Foucault, Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 47-53.

field of domination. If Agamben couldn't resolve the aporias that he generated in attempting to understand this problematic, in Foucault this problematic isn't even developed as such. He understands care of self as a practice without any internal contradiction and without the need for a break from the presupposed subject-object structure: if care of self isn't in any way grounded in a breakdown of the subject-object distinction, whether messianic as not, then it risks becoming another ontology of the sovereign subject.

Here again, it is by delving deeper into the internal problematic of the concept that one can surpass its limits. If Foucault was correct in risking to advance such broad political considerations out of the practices of care of self, it is necessary to do so from the problematics of the categories themselves rather than from their forms of social appearance. Inasmuch as Foucault describes it in rebellious terms, care of self, understood as government of self, also seems to posit a type of sovereignty over the self. In Agamben's terms, this would imply the operation of the apparatus of inclusion/exclusion of bare life, besides remaining clearly within the bounds of a subject/object distinction.

Foucault's account of the development of the practices of care of self and the establishment of a government of self and others assumes that this possibility is immanent to the concept itself. For inasmuch as the one who cares and the thing that is cared for do not coincide, there is a relationship of distinct subjectivation and objectivation that must be considered. Agamben comments on this possibility, mentioning that, according to Socrates in the *Alcibiades*, it is the soul that governs the body; hence the object of care, the 'self' that one must concern oneself with, is precisely the soul, rather than the body itself.

But the heart of this problematic of the care of self and, of the argument for a parallel between *epimeleia heautou* and the repertoire of the area of *autonomia*, is the problematic of use, of *chresthai*, which I have above connected to *autonomia*'s attempt to conceptualize and materialize a practice of use unbound from the dialectics of use and exchange value. Foucault claims:

*Chresthai* actually designates several kinds of relationship one can have with something or himself, use as well as behavior or attitude. Using the gods: having an appropriate relationship with the gods. Taking care of oneself in actual fact does not designate an instrumental relationship with the body or the world, but rather the subjects singular, transcendent position, as it were, with regard to what surrounds him, to the objects available to him, but also to the people with whom he has a relationship, to his body himself, and finally to himself.<sup>74</sup>

The *chresthai* does not concern an instrumental relation with objects, but rather a concern with oneself as one who uses, as one who is subjectified through its use of objects. The soul does not instrumentalize the body as such, but rather enters into a relation with a body which is in a permanent process of becoming through being a body who uses. Since subjectivity, for Foucault, is a process rather than a substance, “such use is not something exterior to the subject, but immanent to it.”<sup>75</sup>

Agamben underlines the need to find within the care of self a use of self, the *chresthai*, the messianic call, that Foucault never comes to fully develop:

The relation of use, which also constitutes the primary dimension where subjectivity is constituted, remains in the shadow and gives way to a primacy of care over use which seems to repeat the Platonic gesture, where *chresis* is turned into care and command, *epimeleia* and *archè*. This is fraught with consequences, inasmuch as the separation between care of self and use of self is set at the root of the separation between ethics and politics.<sup>76</sup>

Agamben’s slight twist upon Foucault’s care of self seeks to open a path toward a care of the messianic self. This would signify an attention to the conditions one revokes in one’s use of oneself and in one’s use of the law that makes the law itself inoperative. This is the issue that Agamben deals with many decades before in relation to violence in his first published article, “On the Limits of Violence.”<sup>77</sup> There, he tries to formulate a

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<sup>74</sup> Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 56.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “On the Limits of Violence” (1973), *Towards the Critique of Violence: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben*, eds. Brandon Moran and Carlo Salzani (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

notion of violence that isn't teleological or instrumental, just as he later tries to understand the autonomy of subjectivation in the use of the self in a non-instrumental way.

Returning to *autonomia*, we can say that it is only inasmuch as one can identify within the manifold processes of consciousness concerned with a becoming that forsakes the distinction between subject and object—not because of some special quality, but because they operate on a time frame that is either too fast (insurrection) or too slow (contemplation)—that one can delve proper care on such mental operation.

Again, Agamben's intuition, even if it is correct, risks being nothing more than a literary effect. It is here that it must be made evident (once again) how these concepts are not poetic affects but express real, concrete social movements, such as practices of secession, exile, and insurrection, just as Foucault's lectures sought to interpret the practices of sects, professional classes, and reflections on friendships, etcetera.

That Foucault developed his genealogy contemporaneously with *autonomia* might suggest that he was trying to comment on the politics of his time, but the argument that practices of self formed a profound dimension of *autonomia* does not rely on such a coincidence. If the autonomy of the *operai* vis-à-vis the union and the party is coupled with sovereign power and the estrangement of waged labour, then one cannot claim that such autonomy is self-sufficient or separate law. This could only be an abstraction. That *autonomia* was called *autonomia* did not depend on an apt philosophical assessment of its condition, but simply on the very immediate aspect of refusal.

A subject who openly rejects his condition as a worker from an organized political position, even if such organization is invisible, is a subject deeply concerned with himself in terms that are very close to Agamben's: we are dealing with a subject who is concerned with revoking his condition through the assumption of its contradictions. That is, we are dealing with workers who assume their factual condition as workers in order to deactivate labour. The explanation of *operaismo* and *autonomia* that I presented in the first part of this thesis thoroughly followed the development of this refusal in terms that compatible with the framework of care of self. In Chapter I, I presented the messianic refusal of a vocation; in Chapter II, I showed how refusal antagonistically materialized

itself in social practices; and in Chapter III, I analysed the communities of care of the self that erupted within the social form of the movement.

The key to understanding the problems that I have raised thus far is to be found within this relation between care and use. Foucault's concept of care of self as an art of being less governed proved itself to be inadequate because it re-establishes government within the subject's command of his very own subjectivity (which is in fact quite similar to the problems with Negri's concept of self-valorization). Hence the turn toward Agamben's messianic framework, which understands care in terms of destituent *use*, one that avoids the pitfall of sovereign subjectivity and instead understands it as a process through which capital's subjectivation disappears within the emergence of the free play of forms-of-life.

This free play is not a utopian and emancipatory reorganization of the social sphere, nor does it ground itself on the redistribution of wealth or on the emergence of truly democratic institutions. Nor does it even seek to refuse or oppose such measures, rather, it sees these things as emerging (perhaps unconsciously) from the care and use in the immediate, sensual experience of struggle, that is, in the destituent power of emergent forms-of-life.

That such immediate sensual experience is usually colored with hedonistic, existential, spontaneous, and violent overtones does not truly express its facticity. Hegel is right when claiming that the first immediate stages of consciousness are the most illusory, but that is only true inasmuch as those stages of consciousness are already set in a dialectical and teleological motion, within an experience of time already determined by the phenomenology of real subsumption. Rather—and this is the relevance of a messianic conceptual framework—such immediacy is immediately transformed once the experience of the tyrannical nature of abstract time is interrupted, regardless of how that interruption comes about. Once the messianic rift is opened, every gesture, whether it is the loudest or the quietest, becomes a destituent potentiality. This is not because such gestures are in themselves already free, but because in refusing the emergence of any subject-object dualism (read: abstraction), they impede the process of subsumption that reconstitutes historical time. Such a messianic rupture is obviously not effectuated by any capacity to stop time as such; instead, it results from multiplying the interruptions of

valorization and abstraction. In themselves, such moments aren't more than ephemeral and episodic, but through their concatenation, articulation and self-reflection, a different sense of immediacy is possible. In terms of *autonomia*, then, this means that, as a series of destituent practices, it was a concatenated sequence of collective experiences of organization and antagonism, of exercises and experiences, that in themselves transformed subjects in their very relationship to objects.

It would be preposterous to suggest that an experience at once so complex and so particular as that of *autonomia* is in its wholeness understandable through this framework, which however tentatively present was not hegemonic nor fully developed within its complex structure. At the same time, it would also incur in the same problem to claim that *autonomia*, as such, was but a debutante ball for the problematic of destituent power which would decades later only appear in any consistent conceptualization. Rather, my claim is that this is the best framework from which to grasp the movement's impasses, limits and contradictions without falling into the dubious exercise of aligning with one of its factions or, on the other hand, advancing a *post-factum* diagnosis of how such a movement could've succeeded. The problematics of the relation between subjectivation and sovereignty do set the theoretical limit *autonomia*, as movement, reached before collapsing, and grasps such limit as a conceptual problem.

The overarching meaning of *autonomia* is to be found in the destituent gesture, in the use-practices of a militant refusal whose primary aim is the dissolution of command and domination. That these gestures materialized and erred through contradictory instances—armed struggle and mass illegality, Leninism and councilism, exile and participation—does not erase the fact that they all expressed variations of the same gesture of refusal. This does not mean, however, that one should hesitate to advance a political and conceptual understanding of *autonomia* beyond its relevance to historians and philosophers. On the contrary, a conceptual understanding of its destituent aspects can only aid and vindicate such inquiries.

If *autonomia* means the primacy of refusal, then the lesson of the critique of *autonomia* would be to never let such refusal be ontologized into any specific reified form. The validity of the messianic framework, which binds such refusal to a vocation, to

a very precise practice of care, is precisely the greatest argument against any eschatological understanding of action, which would measure the value of action in terms of its correspondence to abstractly formulated categories (even if these included “resistance” or “revolt”). Instead, the refusal of ontologization requires us to look for the destituent power of action in the practices of care and use that interrupt the apparatuses of sovereignty and the subject-object relation that they produce in us.

## V. Negative care

The validity of the claim that *autonomia* is best understood through the destituent gesture depends on the possibility of carrying out the operation in reverse: we must now read destituent power through *autonomia*. For the historical experience of *autonomia* and the concepts that it generated challenges certain aspects of Agamben’s aporetic poetization of destitution.

Even without resorting to Foucault, one can identify a category of care in *autonomia* by turning to its feminist collectives, where it completely pervaded their concepts of political action. One sees it mainly in their struggles for wages for social reproduction and in the way they problematized the role of social reproduction in the process of valorization as such. The feminist collectives of *autonomia* made care the centrepiece of their critical analyses of the integration of affective and reproductive labour into the normative social relations of capital: the unwaged labour of tending for others that takes place within relationships of the family and community.

The debate around care as a form of labour gained traction in the following decades, leading to a series of complex questions: capital essentializes social functions according to gender roles. Within such gendering, some labour is deemed unworthy of compensation. Given Marx’s definition of capitalism as the command over free labour, the fact that the toil and drudgery of a whole gender plays into the reproduction of the capitalist system makes gender a proletarian condition. This insight unearths a section of the class whose exploitation is compounded by patriarchy. Women’s labour is exploited not only by the bosses, but also by the bulk of the male working class—namely, their



husbands. Demands for “wages for housework”<sup>78</sup> went hand in hand with several others concerning the social mores that functioned to discipline the female body and its affects: the denial of a female sexuality associated with the firm control over reproductive rights, the prohibition of divorce, the social influence of Catholicism, and so on.

This women’s movement advanced at the same time that some Marxian currents began to put forward the concepts of “total subsumption” and “spectacle,” which raised debates around their relationship. Several of the most openly anti-feminist positions taken by the ‘60s and ‘70s Marxian ultra-left assumed that the emancipation sought by feminist wage struggles around reproductive labour was in fact based on the subsumption of previously uncommodified social roles into the now widespread valorization of every sphere of life. Hence, they viewed women’s liberation as merely the generalization of social alienation,<sup>79</sup> since wages for housework would only augment the commodification of life. Unlike most other Marxian currents, *operaismo* was unique for possessing the conceptual terms for understanding these new wage struggles. Even if it involved monetarization, *operaismo* did not view women’s liberation as incompatible with a revolutionary project and critique of capital; on the contrary, *operaismo* saw this struggle as an additional force for putting pressure upon the profits of capital, alongside the wage demands of workers. Likewise, *operaismo*’s enthusiasm for informal gestures of political organization developed the critical framework from which to understand feminist positions that went beyond their demands for institutional representation.

Regardless, even as a gendered and unpaid form of labour, care is not in any way less determined by capitalist social relations than any other productive function. To claim as much would be to essentialize gender roles within a firmly chauvinistic framework, one whose appraisal of a free sexuality frequently falls into the same problems. Also, the claim that housework (or any other type of gendered labour) alone creates value has been thoroughly debated within Marxian scholarship. The debate is largely decided by whether the categories of productive and non-productive labour maintain their validity

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<sup>78</sup> The international 1972 campaign for Wages for domestic labour was started in Padua by Selma James, Maria Rosa della Costa and Silvia Federici, amongst others.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, the Giorgio Cesarano excerpts in Francis, “The Passion of Communism,” in *Endnotes Journal* 5. Or Camatte’s dismissal of gender theory in a recent interview, “Entretien avec Jacques Camatte,” February 10, 2020, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://youtu.be/EKCoo7Kolew>.

after the total subsumption of society by the value form. The politics behind this debate are nevertheless more relevant than the debate over value itself: the antagonistic power of the demand for housework wages depends on two factors. One, as we've seen, it depends on the capacity for wage increases to pressure the rate of profit and hence diminish the actual political power of capital; and two, along the lines of Negri's concept of self-valorization, it depends on the effectiveness of the strategy of accumulating economic power for an antagonistic use. These factors seem to be the Achilles heel of the politics behind the demand to remunerate reproductive labour, for they make politics depend on the abstraction of the value form, which erases the possibility of affirming the particularity of care (and use) by inventing new practices (or destituting existing ones).

To identify a field of non-commodified actions within the sphere of real subsumption does not necessarily place it outside of capital, but it does, nevertheless, place it at a complex categorical threshold, for care is indeed distinct from most other productive functions if it is not directly subsumed by capital. This threshold is made evident by the way some feminist groups and thinkers engaged this gender essentialization as a political asset. The affirmation of a feminism of difference, as we've seen in the previous chapter, rested on the possibility of a women's partisanship, on their alterity and exteriority to patriarchy, which was much akin to Tronti's partisanship of the *operai*. The formation of "self-consciousness" groups, the development of a praxis of assembly wholly distinct from that of the mixed political groups, and so on, made the complex category of care political in the Schmittian sense of the word, as women's praxis came to define a friend/enemy distinction for itself.

Even if the category of care was more evident in the feminism of difference, one finds it throughout the entirety of *autonomia*, inasmuch as the core of the movement, the cement of its sociality, was made up of the informal social relations outside of capitalist and workers' institutions. If we take the concept of care to refer to non-monetized social relations whose primary concern is a common wealth and joy, then the proletarian sociality that emerged as *autonomia* was indeed a practice of care. The feminism of difference and its essentialization—itsself an example of the apparatus of inclusion/exclusion—is pushed to its limits, becoming a contradiction within the reproduction of capital. Even if it clashes with the critical theory of social reproduction, the feminism of difference does make a relevant point: care's political claim does not

rest on the fact that it produces value, but, on the contrary, on the fact that it consists of something other than value.<sup>80</sup>

There is, however, nothing obvious about what a “common wealth and joy” or “something other than value” is. To resort to sensual immediacy in order to define it does, up to a point, certainly reveal one of its dimensions, but it is also a retreat from a proper consideration of the social implications of this “commons.” To ontologize this “commons”, as Negri, Hardt, and plenty others do, decouples proletarian sociality from the violence and antagonism in which it is enmeshed. This would be to posit the “commons” as the abstract ontological substance of care, abstracted from its material reality in an ontology of social being, just as alienated labour produces material goods, but only as commodities under the dominion of the abstract form of value.

Instead of an ontology of the commons, what must be sought is a concept of care that doesn’t close its openness and indeterminacy in any reified social form. It is with this in mind that I turn to consider care as a category of the partisan *gemeinwesen*, that is, as negative care.

In her essay *Se Défendre (To Defend Oneself, 2017)*, French philosopher Elsa Dorlin discusses the concept of negative care in a sense that is different, yet close to the one that I am suggesting here. Dorlin aims to draw “another genealogy of the ethics we normally bestow upon women<sup>81</sup>” and other subaltern groups. Care “was commonly theorized within a whole tradition of feminist philosophy<sup>82</sup>” as “the historical product of an *a priori* assignment of minority groups to reproductive tasks,” a process that “shows the type of relationships to the world it implies, its ethical implications, the moral posture it produces.” She continues:

[T]he care of others happens in and through violence and generates an ethical positioning wholly different than the affective proximity of love, the compassionate act, affective solicitude or of abnegation in the most testing concerns. (...). Endured violence generates a negative emotional and cognitive posture that forces the individuals who suffer it to be

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<sup>80</sup> See Maya Andrea Gonzalez, “The Logic of Gender,” *Endnotes Journal* 3 (2013).

<sup>81</sup> Dorlin, *Se Défendre* (2017). 174.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

constantly on the lookout, to be constantly listening for the world and others. It forces them to live in an exhausting “radical anxiety,” in order to deny, minimize, defuse, absorb, lessen or avoid violence, to find shelter, to find protection, to defend themselves. So, it’s about developing a series of reasonings capable of deciphering the other, to render their action reasonable and “normal,” to deploy gestures, attitudes and actions to not “upset,” to not “encourage,” to not “unleash” their violence; but also, to live with the almost imperceptible and, as such, constant affects, the emotions, to get used to, to become desensitized to their violence. It is not a question of “caring for others,” of doing something that helps them, that supports them, that recomforts them, that reassures them, that brings security, but of caring for other in order to anticipate what they want, what they will or would do with us—something that potentially devalorizes us, tires us, insults us, isolates us, hurts us, upsets us, denies us, scares us, derealizes us.<sup>83</sup>

Care, even if historically determined, does not imply any superior or concrete form of recognition, beyond mediations of command, rather, it is a “measure of distance (a measure of security), an escape, or even a preparation to confrontation, to combat.” Dorlin’s indictment of care as a positive category nevertheless identifies within it a measure of antagonism which, in the framework drawn thus far, establishes it as a political category. For it is precisely the subaltern position in this relation that is capable of undoing command.

Care here accords with *operaismo*’s epistemology of rupture (albeit without the sanguine exaltation):

The attention demanded from the part of the dominated, which consists of permanently projecting oneself on the intentions of the other, to anticipate their wills and desires, to coalesce into their representations in order to defend oneself, is a product of a knowledge, a knowledge of the most advanced, powerful, dominant groups.<sup>84</sup>

But this epistemology is not one of autonomy or the primacy of antagonism; instead, it is an epistemology of survival. “Only those who truly hate truly know<sup>85</sup>” as Tronti said, but here hate is a survival instinct:

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 174.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Tronti, *Operai e Capital*, 8.

This meticulous objectivation of the other, this need to take the other as an object of attention, far from marking an epistemic privilege, grants, on the contrary, an inordinate power to the object itself. The object becomes the center of the world, which the subject apprehends from nowhere. (...) The object dominates: its perspective totally covers the subject's, its worldview is imposed on that of the subject, its frame of intelligibility is imperial.<sup>86</sup>

The militancy grounded in this epistemology celebrated itself, as we've seen, as an unbridled joyful rage, toppling every tower that dare stand in its way, an eroticization of violence leading to a never-ending messianic or multitudinous orgasm. But Dorlin sees through this in a way that evokes and explains the intense melancholy of most contemporary memoirs of *autonomia*:<sup>87</sup>

The attention of the subject to its object is exhausting: the degree of attention must be high for the acquired knowledge to make self-defense possible. It's an almost uninterrupted intensity of acuity. Alertness is quasi-permanent and produces an exhaustion that prevents any attention to oneself and which forces its own representations, visions, desires, intentions and emotions into the background, to the status of being questionable, whimsical, false data, of being less important information, or even of being insignificant.<sup>88</sup>

The critique of Negri's concept of self-valorization as a productive abstraction that I discussed in Chapter II, finds a clear expression here: "The labour force invested in the process of knowledge is exhausted and can only be reconstituted painfully on the condition of a self-forgetfulness which increases the derealization of one's own point of view, of one's lived world."<sup>89</sup> The permanent mobilization of the class in a *hic et nunc* communism leads to a demobilizing exhaustion and burn out, which appears to reveal what lay behind it all along.

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<sup>86</sup> Dorlin (2017). 175.

<sup>87</sup> See Ida Faré, *Mara e le Altre* (Rome: Feltrinelli, 1979); Barbara Balzerani, *Compagna Luna* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2013); Loredana Bianconi, *Do you Remember Revolution: Women in the Armed Struggle*, 1997, [youtu.be/07uXSZd6vLY](https://youtu.be/07uXSZd6vLY).

<sup>88</sup> Dorlin (2017), 176.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Dorlin's description reads like an apt indictment not only of the feminist problematic she addresses, but can also be transported to an analysis of *operaismo* and *autonomia*. Without resorting to any conceptual totality that would cynically dismiss any shadow of political alterity, Dorlin indirectly calls into question Tronti's idea of a partisan epistemology that grounds the entire structure of *operaismo* and *autonomia*. She does so not by denying the existence and capacity of this partisanship, but by revealing how it is thoroughly built around a preventive fear, around subtle and hesitant attempts to escape through the cracks of domination. In this sense, the subjective informality of antagonism to the objectivity of domination wouldn't be so much an organic strategy but rather the forced expression of domination: the oppressed, the exploited, the excluded are bound to survive shapelessly, endlessly and exhaustingly by eluding control however they can without ever finding solid ground. That *operaismo* attempts to turn this ethics of care into a category of antagonism certainly points to a problem, but it risks merely masking it within a brattish stance which quickly also finds its point of exhaustion.

This antagonist ethics of care would then become a preventive care, the last stance of a tired dignity stuck between tyrannical form and groundless exile. Against this one could only argue for the transversal possibility of a remnant of resistance that is never fully tamed and that persists, even if only through moral will. Or on the contrary one could attempt to reassert the value of invisibility. Dorlin closes off her discussion by implying that the knowledge of command accumulated through negative care is in fact correlated to the ignorance of one's power to act:

To the ethics of care, as it is commonly problematized, we should therefore add a dark side, an ethics of helplessness which can be grasped from all the efforts made to defend ourselves despite everything. In this negative sense, *dirty care* refers to the *dirty care* that one takes of oneself, or rather, to one's power to act by becoming, the experts of others to save one's skin. In other words, this permanent effort to know others as best as possible in order to try to defend oneself from what they can do to us is a technology of power which results in the production of an ignorance—not of ourselves—but of our power to act, which becomes alien to us, alienated. Authentically modest witnesses, submissive, exhausted, docile, the dominated are assigned to a cognitive relationship as to an alienating

gnoseological work. They develop knowledge about the dominant, which constitutes an archive of their phenomenal and ideological omnipotence.<sup>90</sup>

Dorlin misses the point that such knowledge is not an unmediated affect of the subaltern—it is not simply negative—but rather, it has the potential to be transformed into a category of antagonism. Even though her intuition is for the most part correct, within the journals of early *operaismo* we see the systematization of subaltern knowledge coalescing into strong political tools that were all but tools of helplessness.

It is, however, through a different reading of such a concept, of such problematic—negative care—that one can arrive at a different understanding of this apparent dead end. Dorlin departs from the presumption that care is necessarily embodied in categories of tenderness and affection, and she refuses to deploy it as a political category of antagonism or as a subjective rallying point for challenging domination. This is because, precisely by means of negative care, the domination at its source has blocked all paths of subjectivation from the start.

Care, however, assumes plenty of forms beyond those of essentialized female labour (paid or unpaid), and beyond reproductive or “affective” labour—and even beyond care’s Heideggerian essentialization as the primary ontological experience of being-in-the-world. If real subsumption implies that every action is forever stranded in the abstractions that rule social relations, that is, if the metaphysical framework of every action both binds it to a subject/object framework and to the impossibility of experiencing this operation as such, then care is what remains outside the impossibility of action (or tentatively, inside and against it, as Tronti would say), precisely as gesture, as means without ends.

*Autonomia* shows how a category of care, as a negative care, can tentatively appear not as pacification, nor, as Dorlin claims, as the forced ethics of submission, but as inoperativity. This subtle threshold is dependent on the possibility of negative care as a care that refuses to assume any positive form, that refuses to coalesce into a form of identity grounded on an abstract social good, for this would precisely amount to care’s

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

recuperation and subjugation. Whereas, in Dorlin, care is but a form of resilience, a science for surviving failing and denied recognitions, in *Autonomia* it becomes the abandoning of the very collapse of any social form of recognition.

A negative care would then consist in the forms of care which embody refusal and which grasp ahold of the immediate materiality of the interstices of domination. This rupture occurs through the abandonment of the social roles and identities set out by forms of capitalist domination. But this exodus, however, is never announced as such, it doesn't celebrate itself as such, since only as silence, secrecy and invisibility is it capable of truly emerging. This is not a poetical affirmation: Dorlin's account of care is also an account of time bought, of the appropriation of time whose validity rests not on its autonomy (it is very much a time determined by domination) but rather on the possibilities that can be opened there. Such time doesn't aim to build a position of safety or retreat, but rather to build a structure of political and strategic considerations whose only scope is the deactivation of command itself.

This is thoroughly different from the metaphysical impasse of a destituent power or any of its derivative or embryonic formulations in that it doesn't seek to solve a conceptual problem. It refers to a material reality that is through and through apprehensible within all the forms of resistance, organization and antagonism that don't celebrate or promote themselves as such, lest they be caught within their own vanity. This is one of the main outcomes of the rupture with the Marxist politics of "class-consciousness:" the separation of political action from its forms of discursive appearance, from its pedagogical and proselytizing prosthetics. *Autonomia* (and its legacy) certainly developed its own discursive, propagandistic and aesthetic forms,<sup>91</sup> but it did so through its *ceto politico*, its *ceto estetico*, which tried to interpret the widespread iconoclasm of its struggles. Nanni Ballestrini's word collages of the period perfectly illustrate this point.

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<sup>91</sup> See Jacopo Galimberti "The Worker, the militant, and the monster: visualizing revolutionary subjectivities in 1960s and 1970s Italy," *E-Flux Journal*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/video/197791/e-flux-lectures-jacopo-galimberti-the-worker-the-militant-and-the-monster-visualizing-revolutionary-subjectivities-in-1960s-and-1970s-italy/>.



Negative care, then, as an exodus from the verbose, ideological, self-delusional understanding of political action as moral beacon to be replicated. Negative care as an epistemic appropriation that takes the experience of subsumption as its object. To derive such a category from the experience of *operaismo* and *autonomia* does not mean to imply that one can only interpret their conceptual and practical repertoire within it, that is, immanently and without reference to other experiences of struggle. Moreover, within such currents plenty of other considerations apply, with equal claims to soundness. My intent here is to derive a conceptual proposition from *autonomia* that survives whatever concrete manifestations it witnessed within its own development. Its validity vis-à-vis post-*operaismo* rests on its capacity to understand the gesture of antagonism beyond the constitution of a *ceto politico*, beyond the reproduction of the apparatuses of command within the antagonistic movement of refusal. Negative care, then, as a category on the threshold of the political.

The question remains, however, of the historical materiality of this category. If it is to have any legitimacy as a political gesture (even if this consists of taking politics to the point of its self-abolition) then a negative care would have to be graspable within the categories of the political: friend/enemy, program, subject, historicity, etcetera. Lest it become a personal affect, wholly compatible with the reproduction of command, if it is to survive as antagonist gesture, negative care needs to be based on actual forms: just who, then, is the historical subject of negative care?

The historical determinacy of negative care does not come in the form of actions, but rather, in the form of undoing, namely, in the undoing of the world as it is. It has as its object all mediations that emerge from historical being, including all necessary institutions and compromises. Such a world is undone through organizing for the destitution of power, rather for its seizing. The Leninist gestures of Tronti and Negri are very much welcome here, as long as they can be redefined beyond the struggle for power as gestures of care (which may very well include gestures of violence). Instead of a Leninism that aims to bring about the *transition* to communism, negative care aims to bring about immediate communist relations. In this sense, negative care is less a politics than a technique of antagonism.

Even so, this says nothing about the validity of the concept. Even if it is sustainable as an interpretative category for making sense of a period, this doesn't mean it doubles as a historical category, as a political category of class composition, or as a social category of behaviour that surfaces in widespread and unconnected forms. Even if one could argue that it manifests in multiple ways (in the sense that Alquatti's invisible organizations are widespread social phenomena that take both conscious and unconscious forms), this wouldn't make it a valid category, since its historical role would come from its idealist self-consciousness. Rather, one must take into account something else: *operaismo* and *autonomia* are not only messianic movements, but they are also apocalyptic and millenarian. They surface when societal collapse is nigh: the oil crisis, the Rome club report on ecological disaster, the end of the gold standard, the erasure of the rural and Catholic South, the end of the workers' movement, and so on. "Programmatism," the affirmation of a necessary relation between politics and program, isn't so much refused here, as it is obliterated.

The current communization tendencies (Endnotes, *Théorie Communiste*) affirm a contemporary situation where the class has abandoned political projects based on a program of transition. This calls for immediate communist measures—communization proper. But the erasure of such program serves only to salvage a political agency of the proletariat, which always expresses itself through an invariant logical structure. The collapse of a political framework is salvaged by denying one of its terms in order to salvage the other.

The widespread consciousness of collapse dissolves the idea that politics requires both a program and a universal class. The validity of negative care isn't sustained by either. Instead, its value lies in the possibility it opens for political action within a period of desegregation and the collapse of most political apparatuses. Not a recipe for a revolution, but an ethics for collapse. Such distinction isn't however apolitical – rather, such collapse reveals itself as the contemporary framework of any problematic of revolution.

## Conclusion: Pessimism of the intellect, antagonism of the gesture

Not to exercise all the power at one's disposal is to be able to bear  
the void.<sup>1</sup>

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (1947)

I will attempt to resume this thesis claims in a few short sentences. *Operaismo* shifts the methodology of most other "leftisms" that surfaced in the post war, post '56, workers' movement. Rather than radicalize workers' institutions from inside, or to form newer, "anti-revisionist", ones, *operaismo* sought to derive new communist contents from an immanent proletarian rage that would be capable of functioning as the vanguard of the remnants of the previous revolutionary moments. The unions and parties that had formed around previous struggles were to be galvanized by a point of consistency capable of reorganizing the left around a new revolutionary program. If a wide, and radical enough, part of the working class would be capable of once again proposing a consistent revolutionary program, then the rest of the institutional left would be obliged to follow.

Such a point of consistency was there to be unearthed around the naked materiality of exploitation and antagonism that thrived beyond the left's capacity to manage it. It assumed ever new forms inasmuch as capital always assumed ever new forms, and *vice-versa*. *Operaismo* sought to map such a lost continent, to make it aware of itself.

Such a process hinged on the constitution of a *ceto politico*, of a political elite, not made of leaders or specialized cadre *per se*, but made of an informal militant *milieu* that slowly became aware of itself. It was at once both a self-assumed shadow leadership, an

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2003), 10.

"invisible" party (see chapter III), a mass countercultural scene, a diffuse *guerrilla*, an attempt to live differently, and an exercise in proletarian partisanship.

*Autonomia* was the name under which the contradictory experiences of the burgeoning self-consciousness of such *milieu* became known. These would grow increasingly autonomous from the original project of leveraging the entire structure of the workers movement into a new revolutionary impetus, inasmuch as the conceptual and political repertoire of "revolution" in itself started to be questioned and abandoned.

The defeat of *autonomia* as mass movement meant the defeat of both *operaismo*'s constituent wager and *autonomia*'s insurrectional secession. What remains of such movements, beyond their ideological apparatuses, are the techniques of subjectivation unearthed in both processes.

While I have concerned myself in this inquiry with the concepts and limits of *operaismo* and *autonomia* respectively, my chief task has been to present their collective lineage as a series of tentative social forms at the very limit of determinacy. That is, I have progressed through a conceptual lineage whose coherence lies in proposing a series of social forms of non-determination: the refusal of labour, non-labour, partisan *Gemeinwesen*, destituent power, and negative care. Each of these forms—and all of them together as a whole—appear to raise the following question: how can that which evades or exceeds concretization exist in an actual form or have any purchase on reality? The consistency of such forms lies in the intuition that all of them involve the activity of undoing, which is irreducible to either negative or positive qualities. For undoing presents a third element, which is neither the moment of annihilation nor that of positing or edification, but rather one of suspension.

Stated in such terms, the affirmation of undoing is certainly aporetic, a seemingly necessary feature of its development, where every approach to concreteness is but the impetus for a new flight into abstraction. Rather than turn non-determination into a riddle, I aim to find that which *remains* outside and beyond the positive, the negative and the aporetic. Such a category can be named through its condition of possibility: what remains, what isn't exhausted, either by severance or accumulation, or rather, what remains actual after an accumulation of severances, not as positivity, but as an ever

more thorough undoing. Negative care is as such what remains: negative care as the forms of collective subjectivation that persist within and against command and subsumption, while refusing to coalesce as tentative mediations with power.

To dedicate a thesis to a reading of *operaismo* and *autonomia* is to assume that one should be able to close having made a clear argument for their continued legacy: *operaismo* and *autonomia* as developing concepts whose validity and legitimacy outlive their historical moment; *operaismo* and *autonomia* as the political forms that today still have lessons to teach about political and social change; *operaismo* and *autonomia* as beacons of all coming insurrections. I have tentatively made all such claims along the way: the refusal of labour as a social form and of movement as one of its forms of appearance; antagonism as the defining element of contemporary political action; the point of development in capitalist social relations where subjectivation within the dialectic of labour is suspended.

In all of this, the strongest claim to be made here about *operaismo* and *autonomia* concerns their legacy as attempts to touch what remains: what remains after the collapse of labour as a form of social meaning (and its survival as normativity, command and exploitation); what remains of a class perspective after the experience of real socialism; what remains after the compromises of social democracy; what remains after the disaster of armed struggle; what remains after the superficiality of activism; what remains after the sound and fury of the insurrections; what remains after the ruins of the occupations. What remains is precisely the possibility of an antagonistic gesture, here understood as *negative care*. Such possibility fully assumes the dialectical structure of the remnant, for what remains are the partial elements of the aforementioned forms: Marx's ontology of labour is stripped of its productive metaphysics to reveal itself as a mediated becoming that dissolves the separation between subject and object; Leninism's grasp on the shifting compositions of antagonism is grasped after subtracting the focus on sovereign reason; the existential insights of the counterculture preserved at the very point where they stop short of their depoliticization, and so on. The process that I have undertaken here is not one of cumulative synthesis, but of systematic shedding, where what remains is precisely what can survive as an antagonistic gesture.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the memoirs and recollections of the period often come tainted with a dose of melancholy. *Autonomia*'s defeat and the bitter irony that exodus turned into exile are as important as any other element. The grief that surrounds its memory is as much part of its legacy as the proverbial laughter that would "bury [them] all." This leads back to a suggestion whose traces are present throughout the thesis and is overly explicit in Furio Di Paola's claim that *autonomia* represented the attempt of new social and political forms to express themselves inside and against the language of Marxism.<sup>2</sup> It is the proverbial and celebrated use of the phrase, "Marx against Marxism," which reveals precisely how Marxist categories (transition, dialectical materialism, socialism, production, and so on) were still very much present as political paradigms that had yet to be surpassed, and that as such became the focus of an intense inquiry. My claim, that *operaismo* and *autonomia* are attempts to come to terms with a political ontology of destitution, of a negative care, rests on the assertion that those attempts weren't capable of fully understanding themselves.

A political lesson is included therein. The unearthing of a political ontology capable of replacing the ideology of labour in the workers' movement remains impossible as long as it depends on an affirmative metaphysics in order to once again mobilize the force of collective subjectivity. This is not to say that such a force cannot exist, but rather that its *animus* must rest on the acknowledgment of how the grief of past defeats is woven into the way class perceives itself.

This inverts the Gramscian categorical imperative, which commands the ruthlessness of critique to resolve itself in the fierce optimism of the will. Never mind the grim spirit of a theory that tells us to arm ourselves with certainty to the point of projection. For the historical experience of *autonomia*, in all its bashful glory and all its pathetic gloom, replaces the optimism of the will with an antagonism of gesture.

This is already at work within *operaismo* and *autonomia* beyond the categories used by their pundits. Their engagement with the Marxist repertoire is always tense, as if Lenin's and Marx's categories *had* to be used against themselves, as if the political turmoil could *only* express itself through the terms it desperately wanted to abandon. The

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter IV

succession of political forms presented throughout this thesis proves as much: the “party of anarchy,” the “invisible organization,” “movement,” “exile,” etcetera, all rehearse and anticipate the antagonistic gesture of negative care and its suspension of command. Negative care then, is that which is capable of turning worldly and profane determinations into moments of antagonism and exile.

Just as this thesis started by discussing how its structure was determined by the various methodological issues met during research—by the very concrete discovery of the process of thinking, planning, and writing a long form essay—then the moment of its closure, when inquiry and writing come to a necessary stop and all loose ends are tentatively tied, cannot escape being determined by the context of when it happens. If research is never truly finished, only interrupted, then such interruption is as much a snapshot of the object as of the context in which it was researched.

Most of the pages of this thesis were either written, rewritten, or reviewed during the first months of the COVID19 global pandemic. Inevitably, the experience of living through unwritten times played into the attempts to make sense of the general conceptual arch of the thesis. The strangeness of long-term isolation (already a feature of most PhD research work) and the claustrophobic panic of the early months of the pandemic played into an already present element of the thesis: that of the concept of real subsumption and adjacent problematics standing for an interruption and suspension of experience, of subjectivation, of the forms of “invisible” sociality flowing through the metropolis. The diffuse conceptual problem of the thesis showed itself outside of it in very concrete terms.

Inevitably, the opposite process also happened: the *ad hoc* experiences in mutual aid taking place within this same period also played themselves into the unfolding of the thesis. Needless to say, present Lisbon is a world apart from 1970s Italy, even if the collectives I participate in inherit, for better or worse, a part of the organizational legacy of the period. Nevertheless, the specific experience I recount below embodied a number of the problematics I had drawn in the months prior to the pandemic—e.g., an “invisible” organization, the territorial understanding of politics, etc.—and did so precisely in a fashion that unfolded within a suspension of time, albeit one enforced by the state.

The concept of negative care emerged from that bridge between the object of research, the experience of philosophical inquiry and writing, and my own personal experience of such mediations within a very particular context. That I now propose to close this thesis discussing such a concept through a concrete experience risks being understood as positing a legacy to be repeated regardless of its historical reach, an “example”. Lest it become a mere candidate for the newest aporetic figure of revolt, permanently stuck in its own cleverness, a proposal of negative care hinges on its exceptionality rather than its self-celebrated identity as example. The following description is therefore presented not only as corollary of a problematic, but also as a disclosure of method.

The RDA69 social center has been functioning for a decade in Arroios, a rapidly gentrifying inner Lisbon neighborhood. It emerged when several collectives involved in the Portuguese anti-austerity movement of 2010-2012<sup>3</sup> coalesced into a single project and decided to rent a space to host it. A weekly assembly runs the place, which serves the gregarious and organizing functions normally associated with this type of project, providing a meeting space for other collectives and political initiatives, hosting events which ground the social life of “the movement,” organizing regular debates and presentations on current events, and so on. Funds are assured through a bar that functions on the premises. Its most striking feature, however, is how it manages a fully functioning canteen that sells cheap meals for lunch and dinner, five days per week. The canteen is used by both sympathizers and by the neighborhood’s residents and workers, often for no better reason than its cheap prices. Canteen shifts are waged and planned each month, within a structured framework which allows for sick leave and holiday pay. Over the years, the functioning of the canteen has been a contentious point within RDA69’s assemblies: on the one hand, it provides an essential service and it shows remarkable organizational skills, on the other hand, it is always on the risk of engulfing all other activities, turning the social center into a business venture and mediating participation in the project through instances of economic necessity.

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<sup>3</sup> For a description of these struggles, see “On the passage of a few thousand people through a brief period of time,” *Edições Antipáticas* (2012), [libcom.org/library/passage-few-thousand-people-through-brief-period-time](http://libcom.org/library/passage-few-thousand-people-through-brief-period-time).



In March 2020, when the Portuguese government announced confinement measures due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, a discussion surfaced: RDA69's finances were at an all-time low and the social-distancing measures surely spelled the space's closure, as well as the abrupt reduction in earnings for those living off the canteen. A take-away model was tried out for some days, but it soon became clear that nobody was venturing out to eat.

Arroios, its neighborhood, was deserted. It has long been a home for the city's homeless population, especially after the destruction of the peripheral shanty towns in the late '90s. With the streets emptied of tourists, students, and workers, only the often invisible homeless and immigrant population remained. Their number, however, soon skyrocketed: the sudden closure of the food sector in a tourism-driven economy meant that hundreds of already precarious workers were suddenly jobless, and soon thereafter, homeless. The quarantine also meant that the restaurant's cheap meals and leftovers on which a lot of people lived were now non-existent, and that the government's means of assistance were also temporarily halted.

This is where RDA69 decided to make a seemingly suicidal gesture: instead of closing down it would suspend canteen wages and spend its last funds giving out free meals for as long as the money or the quarantine lasted. The first week it gave out around 50-60 meals per day. The second week was around 120-130. During the third week, it peaked at around 200 meals per day and that became the average number throughout the pandemic. The recipients weren't only the homeless, but also a lot of the impoverished population suddenly cut off from the informal economy. Monetary donations, quite unusual in local political culture, started pouring in, allowing the project and the free canteen to continue. Cooking was assured by both collective members and new volunteers, with over 50 people helping out regularly. Alongside RDA69, other spaces in greater Lisbon began doing the same. All in all, over 1,000 people were fed daily by autonomous spaces in a country where such spaces have little to no tradition, unlike Italy, Spain, or Greece.

The obvious debate soon surfaced: the gesture was certainly fruitful, but was it political? The state's failure to provide for its citizens in a time of crisis was attenuated by the movement's efforts at ameliorating the situation; its purported antagonistic aims

turned to charity, which recast the movement's participants as worthy members of civil society. The answer came swiftly enough, however, when social relations started to emerge between the people running the canteen and the homeless population. As the weeks went by, more and more canteen shifts were assumed by people who had long lived on the street, or who had been recently evicted and found themselves houseless. From this cohabitation a new plan emerged. The forced closure of day centers for the homeless population meant they were forced to wander the streets aimlessly, lacking essential means to wash their clothes, charge their phones, or simply sit down and rest. The plan to jointly squat a building just behind RDA69 emerged, and a few days later "Seara" was opened, a new day center. People could pick up their meal and have the "luxury" of eating it in a chair, sheltered from the sun and rain, drink some coffee and play some dominoes, as well as wash their clothes and charge their phones. Soon after, a group of recently unemployed and evicted workers decided to squat the empty buildings next to Seara. Soon after that almost the whole block was squatted. Every week, new people who had lived at a great distance from the activist *milieu* showed up to help cook at RDA69 or run activities at Seara.

This lasted for a month until the proprietors, a global hedge fund, took notice. Faced with the impossibility of an instant eviction, a private security firm was (illegally) hired to forcibly evict Seara. Around 300 people spontaneously surrounded the space and physically blocked the eviction from happening, until the police arrived and protected the armed bouncers. Skirmishes followed and some of the protesters managed to reenter Seara and barricade themselves inside the building. The siege and the occupation lasted until 11 P.M., when, faced with increasingly violent threats from the police, the occupants decided to abandon the space.<sup>4</sup> RDA69's free canteen continued until September 6, always on the verge of seeing its funds run out, having served over 25,000 free meals over the course of five months. The space still opens daily at lunch time, providing a place to have a shower, charge the phone, wash some clothes and drink some coffee.

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<sup>4</sup> Some days later, some of the homeless people involved in Seara spontaneously organized their first ever demonstration in front of the parliament concerning homelessness.

This short description obviously glosses over several problems that one could find in such a project. It does show, however, a remarkable organizational capacity: to cook 200 meals seven days per week for five months without any monetary compensation and with severely limited resources shows a coordination of effort that greatly surpasses many formal organizations. That this effort quickly unveiled a running antagonism hidden beneath metropolitan property relations also shows that such organizing inherently stretches far beyond the dimension of charity. Last but not least, that such project was directly met with discretionary violence also expresses how this antagonism plays out in contemporary politics.

And yet, how is this undoing? These projects unwork monetized and crystallized social relations and their place within power relations. They do so through a collective inquiry into reproductive needs and into the antagonism contained in them. Moreover, they do so in a moment of brutal intensification of state power: the sovereign management of a pandemic, where the modern state could only react as nothing other than which it is. Within the lockdowns, the resilience of sovereign and economic structures was at least as much of a concern as public health. The free canteen is not an example of social relations to come, or of a “fixed” realm of interdependency—it is an expression of an antagonism that grounds itself within the specificities of the moment: what is relevant here is not the gesture of providing free food, but the gesture of doing so within a context of a brutal reconfiguration of social life.

The concept of care sheds its pious connotations here to assume the antagonist core at the heart of any process of subjectivation. Relations rehearse appropriation, obviously because of the militant push in that direction, but beyond the reach of activist voluntarism. Different identities and social roles tendentially dissolve into a political sphere where mutual aid stops being a duty and becomes a political technique with a communist content. Granted, when the aim of the project runs up against its limits, the separation between militants and non-militants reemerged almost untainted. But it is not a secondary issue that such limits were materialized by means of exceptional violence: negative care attests to a historical situation where increasingly non-institutional and openly antagonistic forms of political action will emerge as a tendency within class struggle and will face an increasingly discretionary violence, both private and public. What is tendentially undone and revealed in this situation is the violence that subtends

the link between reproduction and command and exploitation. In addition, it undoes the presupposition that political organization must rely on sovereign apparatuses. The canteen and the squatted social center didn't eschew strategic and tactical thinking. Rather, they become, in all their limits, forms of using spontaneity and invisibility towards a communal, rather than military, subjectivity.

*Operaismo's* insurrectional call to arms seems a world away from such claims. It is through *operaismo*, however, that the tools are developed from which to grasp such forms and their power. Neither its Dionysian pessimism, nor its Schmittian enmity, nor even its Spinozian optimism: negative care is the form of militancy that remains beyond their validity, but within the forms of power there unearthed.

The conceptual possibility of a negative care synthesizes the elements drawn throughout this thesis: First, an account of an antagonism that expresses itself outside any form of institutional representation. Second, the practices of subjectivation that occur through Foucault's and Agamben's concepts of care and use, meaning the collective actions that seek to undo instances of command through a series of sustained and self-reflexive efforts. Third, the grounding of such previous elements-antagonism, care, use-in the forms of sociality drawn within and against command and subsumption.

Care does not imply an affective, reproductive or assistentialist action. Rather, it implies a reflexive gesture in which the conditions of possibility of a separation between subject and object are revoked: care as the open impetus within subjectivation. Once such subject-object division is recognized as an expression of command, care becomes thoroughly antagonistic. It is within that antagonism that the concept of care loses its apparent substance of reproductive aid. Why keep with the concept then? because as such care refers to the aforementioned destituent self-reflexivity rather than to any separated sphere of activity.

Care as negation, but as a negation that cannot repurpose any updated institutional or metaphysical hierarchy of separation; hence a negative care, whose core of antagonism and destitution surfaces as an enduring gesture rather than a concrete repertoire.

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